# Resuscitation

**Summary**

A false accusation leads to Akira being sent away to Tokyo for a year, his probation leads him to meet many like-minded individuals that he learns to call his allies, and, eventually, his friends.
Chapter 1

Akira startled, not for the first time since his fate had been handed to him through the maniacal grin of a judge. Somehow, he got the impression that aforementioned judge’s pockets had been lined quite frivolously for his sentence, but at the same time, he was lucky enough to receive what he had.

A year away from home.

A year away from everything he knew.

He’d never been away before, not outside of the border of his town and definitely not to Tokyo where a friend of his parent’s, whom he’d never met, was supposed to be keeping an eye on him for his probationary period. His parents didn’t seem to mind casting him off to A. someone he’d never met and B. someone he’d never seen before. Sure, he had the address, but what if it had been typed out wrong and he ended up with another Sakura Sojiro. It could happen, he assured himself, with a somewhat satisfied grin, though, he supposed, judging from the old lady sliding away from him, it could have been a grimace or something worse. For a moment, he considered apologizing. Nobody ever apologized to me… He thought, expression turning quite bitter as he considered the trial. His own trial, where he wasn’t even allowed to explain himself. I’m bitter, so sue me. He almost laughed at his rather stupid, play on words, and hoped, prayed rather, than he wouldn’t have to face another law suit in his lifetime.

His last train was, fortunately, a bullet train that would take him straight from the edge of Tokyo to Yongen-Jaya, where he was to be staying for the next 365 days, he was, naturally, ever so grateful it wasn’t a leap year. It was only a twenty minute journey from the outskirts of Tokyo to his second-to-last stop of one Sakura’s Residence. It was… impressive, to say the least, and he did not feel like throwing up after experiencing such brutal speed for the first time in his life. But, he willfully admitted, to himself, in his mind, that he was, perhaps, maybe a bit, nauseated.

The train station trash can didn’t know what hit it, or rather, what projectile-vomited it. Akira had to admit, even he was a little grossed out by the smell, and quickly evacuated from the area before the other three people that got off at Yongen-Jaya could question what he had eaten or done to cause such a stench, for not even Akira could answer such a question.

The home belonging to Sojiro Sakura had a very strange look, and was the closest to the shops around the... town, he wondered if Yongen-Jaya could be considered a town, it gave off more of a village-esque vibe. He shook those thoughts away, and decided to ring the doorbell of the Sakura residence. There was a muffled ding....dong.... that even he could hear, yet, despite this, he received no answer, no validation of host-to-guest relations. Akira could not claim to be a good host, having never had even a friend over to his own home, but was able to assume to things while he waited for an answer to his doorbell ringing.

One. People answer the door when it rings.

Two. People should answer the door when expecting company, especially if that company rings the doorbell to your residence twice, more so when it is rung a third time.
Akira jumps when he finally hears something other than the muffled *ding... Dong....* from the other side, the side which he’s supposed to be in by now, of Sakura-san’s door.

“Ah right! Sakura-san will be at his café at this time of day...” Akira steps backwards, fight-or-flight instinct telling him to *get out of there!* Unsuccessful in his attempts to run away, or make his heart stop beating so quickly, he finally takes a glance to the person who interrupted, what would have been, his fourth doorbell ringing. The intruder was a delivery-person, a delivery man, specifically; said delivery man was holding a box, one with, Akira could only assume, but his speculation was undoubtedly correct, the name of Sakura Sojiro.

Akira considered, very briefly, to offer to sign for the package, or whatever it is one does to authorize the acceptance of packages in a foreign land such as Tokyo, but thought better of it. He had a café to find, and a Sakura-san to live with. Grateful for a sense of direction, Akira bowed to the delivery man, who made a startled noise as if he had only noticed the other human in the vicinity, which, Akira supposed, could be the truth, then he turned on his heel and went to look for this café.

Fortunately, for both him and Sakura-san’s business, and potential well-being, there was only one café in Yongen-Jaya area. The name, however, was not something he was able to grasp. It seemed very out of place in a rustic village in the middle of Tokyo, even if said village maybe, perhaps, gave him a sense of grounding; as if he were back home, but home was just a little different. It was nice, not that he’d admit it. ANYWAY! He thought, loudly, before anything else could interrupt him. This is supposed to be punishment! Akira reminded himself, pushing at the glass door of LeBlanc, only to meet resistance. Once he tried pulling the barrier between him and the inside of the café was removed and he was, ever so suddenly, face to face – although, he supposed it was more, face-to-floor turned to face to face between a bar. It was, for the second time that day, a nauseating experience.

Akira lifted himself off the floor.

Now he was face to face with an employee of LeBlanc, an employee who could, hopefully, lead him to the location of one Sojiro Sakura.

“Hello. Do you know Sakura Sojiro?” Akira said slowly, the person behind the bar stared at him; Akira managed to return the stare for all of four seconds before he found his gaze on the floor instead. *Maybe Sakura-san was camouflaged in ugly floor tiles?*

“You must be Kurusu.” The employee said after Akira spent several moments scanning the café’s floor for one Sakura-san in disguise. “I don’t understand all *this,*” The employee waved his hands in a crude imitation of what Akira had done, “but your mom sent a picture with your record.”

*Ah, this must be Sakura-san.* Never, in his recent memory anyway, could Akira recall being so embarrassed. His face had never felt warmer in his life. Now that he got another glance of Sakura-san he could see that how one might name their child as such.

Akira nodded, finally, realizing he had yet to confirm his identity of *that criminal*, but found himself unable to meet eyes with whom he assumed to now be Sakura-san.

Sakura-san grumbled something even Akira couldn’t catch, but tapped the bar in front of him with his free hand, the other one was now occupied with a cigarette. “Go ahead and take a seat,” Sakura-san slapped down a little notebook, one Akira assumed was for taking orders, but considering the lack of customers had seen no recent use. He did as instructed and climbed aboard the barstool.
“I don’t know any sign language, and I’m not gonna bother learning for a delinquent like you, so,” Sojiro stated, slapping a pen down on the counter as well, “You better right legibly.” There was a crack of a grin, but it held contempt, or perhaps malice, Akira couldn’t figure out which, and he supposed it didn’t matter. He grabbed the pen, clicked it to life, and began to write, feeling somewhat embarrassed, though not for the first time in his life, over the legibility of his handwriting. He took a few extra moment, much to the assumed Sakura-san’s annoyance, if the grunts were anything to go by.

Finally, he set down the pen, and flipped the little note pad around so the employee could read it.

**Are you Sojiro Sakura?**

The man behind the bar had the gall to laugh at him. “Wasn’t that obvious?” Sakura-san did mention a photo being sent with his file, but people can get *files* and *photos* anywhere, and it was better safe than sorry. His thoughts seemed to replay across his face and Sakura-san laughed again.

“Yes, I am Sojiro Sakura, the one who is taking care of the delinquent turned criminal for an entire year.” Sakura-san sounded bored with it, but the word criminal slapped Akira in the face that his vision was spinning. “Anyways, you don’t got problems hearing, do ya? My handwriting isn’t the best and I don’t really like yelling.” Despite himself, Akira’s eyebrow twitched at question, but managed to shake his head, face blank.

Sakura-san nodded, clearly pleased that his delinquent wouldn’t inconvenience him more than necessary. “You’ll be staying upstairs, your parents already sent your stuff here so go ahead and check it out.” Sakura-san pointed to a set of rather dusty stairs with his cigarette and Akira obliged.

As expected, there was a large box at the top of the stairs with his name on it, beyond that was a realm of dust and, in the corner, a futon and pillow. *How generous,* Akira thought darkly.

Behind him, the scuffling of shoes and suddenly Sakura-san, as if drawn by Akira’s ungrateful thoughts, was, once again, in front of him. The older man extended his hand, and hands him a book; a leather-bound journal. “I expect you to right down your daily doings in this. Don’t even think about skipping a day.” Akira blinked, then nodded. Recording his daily events? What was he a… Akira almost snorted with the urge to laugh, he supposed, rather dully, that he *was* a criminal in the eyes of his new caretaker. An unfortunate, but expected, outcome.

Akira nodded dumbly, “Thanks.” He said, twisting his fingers. Sakura-san scowled.

“That better mean, ‘Thank you so much, Sakura-sama, for letting me crowd your attic for an entire year’”

Akira nodded firmly in assent.

If anything, Sakura-san’s scowl deepened, but the older man turned around and left without further response or provocation. Akira turned around as well, now facing the room which he would supposedly be dwelling in for the next year.

*The attic of a café, who would have thought.* Akira surely wouldn’t have expected to be living in such conditions in his entire life. He shrugged it off, it wasn’t like he could go out and rent an apartment in Tokyo, not with exactly 0 Yen to his name.

Smiling to himself, Akira dug through the box his parents sent for a few moments then shoved it onto a nearby shelf, unfortunately, moving the box had the adverse effect of sweeping up a lot of
dust into the air and practically choking him. Then it occurred to him that he should probably clean
this place up before he jumped onto the futon and tried to sleep off this nightmare.

Cleaning Mission One was a go!

After the bulk of the dust was removed from his living quarters, Akira couldn’t help but feel a little
satisfaction at his handiwork, while he hadn’t bothered moving any of the items in the attic in fear
of angering his host, he did managed to make the mess… less messy. Enough for him to sleep
somewhat comfortably, that is.

He was drawn out of his thoughts by a satisfied noise that he couldn’t well place. Turning around,
he was met with, once again, the image of Sakura-san, who was now flicking ashes onto a portion
of clean, or rather, what was clean floor. Akira tried not to twitch. Sakura-san didn’t seem to notice.

“You cleaned up.” Sakura-san observed, as if it wasn’t obvious, “A clean delinquent, who’d’ve
thought.” Sakura-san laughed seconds after saying it. He tried his best to smile indulgingly but he
knew it fell short. “That’s probably enough for now, you got school tomorrow. I’ll drive you to
introduce you and whatnot but after that you’re on your own.” Akira nodded, not really expecting
this, but he was often following with what others said due to his situation.

“We’re leaving early, so get some sleep.” Sakura-san turned around and headed down the stairs,
completely ignorant to Akira’s question of “How early is that?” Akira threw his hands down to his
sides in frustration, not for the first time in his life, and definitely not the last, unless, of course, he
suddenly learned how to speak!

Opening his mouth only lead to disappointment, however. He went to sleep after that.

After waking from what he might described as the creepiest dream he’d ever had, featuring a set of
twins in matching outfits and a lot of chains, Akira found himself back on the first floor of Café
Leblanc, his home for the next 365 days.

Or was it 364, now? He’s not sure if the half day he spent in Yongen-Jaya counted towards his
parole, but he’d certainly find out once it was over. Unless he forgot, which was a possibility, just
like he forgot to actually listen to Sakura-san as the older gentleman began speaking about well,
something, Akira already admitted that he hadn’t been paying attention. I should probably do that.

Shaking a loose clump of hair that had begun to tickle the edge of his nose, the young man
unfiltered his ears and the gravelly, uninterested rambling of Sakura-san went in one ear and,
unfortunately, did not pass out the other.

“…After today, you’ll be responsible from getting yourself to and from school. If I hear that you’re
skipping class, I won’t hesitate to call your parole officer.” Lovely, he thought, wondering
contritely if he exuded a particular stench or aroma that made him smell like a dangerous criminal
that doesn’t listen to adults in authority. Which, Akira supposed, was true to some extent, he had,
in fact, not been listening to Sakura-san when he had been what Akira might describe as ranting. At
least, he thought, ever the optimist, it seems as though he cares. While Sakura-san’s eyes, scowl,
and demeanor indicated the complete opposite, the teenager knew for certain that one doesn’t
lecture endlessly without caring, at least a little bit. Not for the first time, he couldn’t help but
wonder how it was that Sakura-san and his parents were connected, if they were connected, like
Sakura-san seemed to imply. He’d certainly never heard of Sakura Sojiro before in his entire life,
nor Café Leblanc. Concerning, but ultimately pointless conjecture. He doubted Sakura-san would
even answer him if he wrote it down in his rather official notebook, which was definitely not a pad
for taking orders.

Fortunately, Sakura-san provided him with breakfast, which was more than he could say about dinner.

“Sit. Eat.” Akira’s hands twitched. Maybe, perhaps, he had grown a pair of dog ears and matching tail in his sleep. He took his seat, reached a hand into his hair and felt around the entirety of his scalp; twice. Predictably, there were no such appendages attached to his head. Sakura-san stared at him, his gaze a physical presence, though Akira did not know how he managed to do so. Akira stared at what was, presumably, the receptacle at which he’d been ordered to, and he quotes, but only in his head, “Eat.” A plate, half with rice, half with curry? Unmistakably curry. At… Akira glanced, ever so subtly to the walls around Leblanc, firmly, and not at all fretfully, avoiding the gaze of Sakura-san. Seven in the morning.

Akira would consider himself a, relatively, normal individual, despite his criminal record. He woke up on time for school, brushed his teeth twice a day, bathed regularly, so on so forth. Never, not even once, had it occurred to him to consume curry at, once again, he glanced at the clock, seven o’one in the morning. In spite of his hesitancy, and submitting to the whims of his newfound caretaker in hopes of gathering a shred of decency or compassion, Akira found himself picking up his provided eating utensil, a spoon, and placing it graciously into the thick mixture of his breakfast and eventually, said implement found itself wedged between lips which haven’t uttered a sound in over a decade.

He’d moan if he had the ability to do so, of that he was certain. Something in his face, perhaps a twitch of his eyebrows or something, must have given these exact thoughts away as Akira noticed that Sakura-san was smiling, this time without his previous malice or contempt, or whatever the older man would use to describe his feelings toward a teenage criminal. Instead, Sakura-san looked pleased, and possibly, dare he think it, human. Clearly, Akira realized without much thought, as he continued to shove food into his mouth to experience bliss several times over, Sakura-san was very proud of his curry. As he should be, another part of him retorted, Akira nodded along to his own thoughts. After a moment of briefly, very briefly, licking the plate clean, despite his stomach already being beyond capacity from the handy helping, Sakura-san stole away the temptation, and his spoon, which was fortunate, because Akira was beginning to lose what self-control he thought he had. Sakura-san whisked around, placing the plate and spoon into a sink Akira hadn’t noticed before and immediately whipped around to face his charge.

Akira, understandably, swallowed.

“Was it good?” Akira nodded. The grin on Sakura-san’s face told him that he didn’t need the confirmation. “Thought so.” The older man tacked on, scrubbing at his short beard with his hand before removing his apron.

Sakura-san’s face went cold again, Akira watched the change without directly observing it, lest he somehow provoke Sakura-san in somehow and one of his customers ends up telling the opposite of the truth. Again. A sour taste enveloped his mouth and he rather wished he didn’t eat so much, for a bloated stomach only added to his unease and annoyance, both at himself and… he didn’t even know the guy’s name, just a faint recollection of his voice, and her voice, and that was about it. He didn’t, couldn’t, regret it now. It had been the right thing to do, even if that woman lied in front of people about what had actually happened. It was in the past now, he was fated to move on, but he could still be salty about it in the meantime. He’d allowed himself this much.

“Men aren’t usually allowed in my passenger seat.” Sakura-san said as they were walking the short distance from LeBlanc’s entrance to Sakura-san’s car, he wasn’t sure if was supposed to hear this
commentary, or if it had been aimed at him, or if he should enter the backseat. Akira found himself in the passenger seat, unsure, and also very uncomfortably, he would rather not know about what Sakura-san did in his passenger seat, the one Akira was sitting in right now.

Traffic, as expected of a city, was nightmarish, but they eventually arrived at the school without any trouble, aside from Sakura-san’s grumbling. Shujin Academy was a school, as expected; but larger than any building that existed in his town, something he should have expected, but didn’t account for. Even the gates were large and imposing, and rather sharp. He scooted past them, following Sakura-san’s footsteps until they arrived outside of the principal’s office. They didn’t have to wait very long, fortunately, for Akira was growing tired of counting the ceiling tiles, before they were allowed into said principal’s office. Sakura-san looked, predictably, annoyed and quite stonily-faced. Akira, however, tried his best to look smaller, unimposing, and anything but delinquent-y, or criminal-y, but he supposed those adjectives went hand in hand.

“You must be Sakura-san.” The only man in a suit said from behind his impressive looking desk, “and,” The principal looked down at a stack of papers, presumably the file he had for his transfer, “Kurusu-kun.” The formality was tacked on with such ferocity and blatant disrespect, he wondered why the man even felt the need to address him. Akira nodded, not wanting to make trouble before his first day of classes even started, then bowed with forty-five degrees of pure politeness, as expected of someone addressing his senior.

“I am principal Kobayakawa.” Principal Kobayakawa said. Sakura-san nodded. Akira nodded. The lady in the orange sweater who was also in the room nodded. “I’ve looked over your file, Kurusu-kun.” He tacked on, eyes narrowing and contracting as if to intimidate, fortunately, Akira was growing quite proficient at avoiding eye contact.

“You seemed to be quite the student at your old high school,” Kobayakawa went on to say, Akira just stood there, unsure if he should attempt communication or just let the adults decide his future while he happened to be in the room; he suspected the latter. “But you’re not at your old high school, anymore.” The phrasing sounded so innocent, yet menacing; impressive yet, lacking in something. Akira wasn’t sure what. “But, even with your disability, I’m sure you will make a fine student at Shujin Academy.”

Akira bristled, and perhaps it was his imagination that caused the room to drop a few degrees and the degree of awkwardness to rise into dangerous territories. He thought, briefly, about correcting the man, that being unable to speak wasn’t a disability but just something that people lived with. He could still communicate with others, just through his hands instead of his lips. Instead of responding, he made sure to keep his face devoid of tension and emotion, and kept his hands very firmly by his sides, though they were clenched into fists.

“You will be placed in class 2-D, Kurusu-kun, that would make Kawakami-sensei,” Kobayakawa raised a hand, gesturing to the woman in the orange sweater who had been lingering beside Kobayakawa’s desk. He glanced at her to find that she was staring at him, a rather familiar expression was taped on her face. Exasperation, pity, and boredom. Something Akira expected out of teachers that had the misfortune to get stuck with him as a student. He nodded, as expected, and Kobayakawa continued.

“Sakura-san, as Kurusu-kun’s legal guardian, you will be responsible for filling out his enrollment forms.” Kobayakawa said, reaching, and struggling to do so, over his desk to hand Sakura-san a stack of papers. Sakura-san shot him a dirty look as he stepped forward and leaned over the desk to begin scribbling on the forms. Minutes passed with Akira staring out the window; thinking, considering, and reminiscing on the actions that lead him here, which he has been doing a lot lately. He supposed that a lot of people thought about their actions when they landed in jail, he
happened to be fortunate to have a Tokyo-sized cell to mull about. Jail. The word skittered across his brain and suddenly a sense of unease drifted over his skin, causing a shiver as he recalled being in an actual cell inside of a prison. His mind supplied him images of the twin wardens he had encountered, as well as the long-nosed man beyond the bars of his desk.

Ruin. Rehabilitation. He wondered what these words meant in reference to him, what ruin had they spoke of. This was assuming, unlike his life, his dreams were making sense; which he shouldn’t expect of a dream, even if said dream had felt more real than his actual life since he’d been all but banished to Tokyo.

His internal monologue ended appropriately it would seem, for Sakura-san was finally signing for the last time with a rather loud and decisive flick of the principal’s pen. Sakura-san straightened his back, and Akira watched as he rolled his shoulders and finally took a couple steps back. Kawakami stepped forward then, approaching him with her previous indifference intact.

“This is your school ID,” She began, handing over what was in fact, a piece of plastic with his face on it, as well as the symbol representative of Shujin. He nodded, signed his thanks out of reflex then immediately flushed. Kawakami seemed taken aback, as if his method of communication were a sign of an aneurysm instead of an expression of gratitude. Despite his embarrassment, he resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Oh yes, about that…” Principal Kobayakawa continued. Akira assumed it was safe to assume that was in reference to his sign language. “I don’t think you should use…” Kobayakawa paused, Akira wasn’t sure if it was for dramatic effect or if the man had simply forgot he’d started speaking, “that.” Again, it was safe to assume the subject in which that was referring to. And again, he resisted the rather tantalizing urge to roll his eyes. “Around the other students and faculty. They might even call the police on you, and we’d like to avoid any unnecessary complications considering your parole.” Kobayakawa didn’t even seem the slightest bit remorseful as he basically said, Please shut up for the next year, criminal scum. Akira nodded, despite the rage that was beginning to seethe in his stomach. Again, he was being made to pay again for stopping a crime. Still, he did not regret it. So he nodded again, decisively, to himself, though Kobayakawa seemed pleased enough. “However, we have decided to provide you with this.” Kobayakawa pulled out a thin block of wood, then flipped it over to reveal a blank, white surface. “This white board will be used in place of sign language as long as you attend Shujin Academy.” The Principal leaned forward and extended the white board. Akira was too shocked to react, at least, for all of five seconds, before he grabbed it and tucked it under his arm. Kobayakawa was quiet, fortunately, in that silence Akira tried to reign in his shock.

Finally, Kobayakawa cleared his throat and began speaking again, “To reiterate,” His tone now formal to the point that Akira wondered if this was the beginning to a scripted message, “just so we’re clear, you will be immediately expelled if you cause any problems. To be honest, I hesitated accepting someone like you, but there were circumstances on our side…” As soon as Kobayakawa began to trail off he picked right back up, tone firm once again, “You might have done a variety of things in hiding in your home town, but you will behave yourself here. If you are kicked out of our school, there will be no place for you to go. Keep that in mind.” Again, Akira nodded, despite the obvious lie in the principal’s statement. He had an actual prison cell with his name on it if Sakura-san found out he’d been expelled.

“Anything else, Kawakami-sensei?” Kobayakawa asked, his voice, for once, taking on the tone of someone addressing another human being. Kawakami-sensei stepped forward again, “Please read over the school rules, any infractions will land you straight in the guidance office.” Obviously, from the guidance office, he’d be sent straight to jail. “And if, by chance you cause any problems, I won’t be able to protect you at all.” That stunned him, just a bit, that there was even the implication
of protection from a teacher he’d just met. He felt a little better about Kawakami being his teacher then, despite her demeanor, she seemed to be trying to be a decent teacher.

With that, they were excused from the principal’s office. Sakura-san didn’t stop walking until they reached his parked car and they both climbed in and drove back to Yongen-Jaya in silence.

“You’ll be taking the train to school from now on.” Sakura-san reminded him as the older man made his way behind the counter of Café Leblanc. Akira waited until Sakura-san was looking at him before he nodded. Sakura-san dug something out of his pockets, then placed it on the counter and slid it forward.

“Station pass.” Sakura-san said before Akira had the chance to identify it. “Don’t lose it.” He nodded, accepted the gift and pocketed it before waving his goodbyes to Sakura-san as he escorted himself upstairs.

The few hours he’d been awake seemed to take a toll on him, and he only noticed it when he finally allowed himself to return to his slightly dusty futon.

He took a nap.

When he woke up, the attic he deemed his dwelling was completely dark. Then it happened. Ah, he thought, realizing why he’d woken up and remained tired.

In the distance, though still loud enough to wake him, was the sound of a ringing telephone. He checked his own pockets, found his phone low on battery but not ringing. The ringing continued. Wiping the blurriness from his eyes, he found himself on his feet and descended the stairs to Leblanc’s attic. Across the bar was the source of disturbance. A telephone. Akira admitted he wasn’t much of a conversationalist, and hesitated to walk towards the vibrating, yellow device. Sakura-san would probably send him to jail for answering his telephone. The phone, oblivious to his struggle, continued to ring until finally.

“Hello?” The person on the other line said, sounded annoyed. “Oh right, uh…” Akira blinked, wondering if he was, once again, whisked into a nightmare. Maybe this one will provide a different message. Instead, the voice of Sakura-san continued to rant into his ear. “Can you flip the sign on the door? I forgot to do it when I locked up.” Akira put the phone on the counter, did as he was asked, and returned to the receiver.

“Did you do it?” Akira nodded and Sakura-san muttered something he couldn’t catch on the other line. “Just tap the phone twice when you’ve done it.” Akira waited for all of five seconds before he brought his palm to the microphone end of the phone and tapped his palm twice against it.

“Right, anyway,” Sakura-san was saying once Akira had stuck the phone back against his ear, “Flipping the sign will be your responsibility from now on. Got it?” He tapped the phone twice, Sakura-san sniffed. “Good. Don’t forget you have school tomorrow.” Another two taps, then without further preamble, Sakura-san hung up on him and Akira was left in a dark café with a buzzing received that begged to be put down.

He didn’t go straight back to bed. Instead, he tracked up the stairs, grabbed his toothbrush, went back downstairs to the little bathroom the café had to offer and brushed his teeth and took care of other business. After that, he made the trek back upstairs, plugged his cell phone in, crawled into bed, fluffed his pillow and closed his eyes. The past few weeks flew across his mind, as they were wont to do, he tried his best to ignore the sinking in his gut that occurred each time he relived his verdict. Then he went to sleep, and didn’t have any dreams about ruin or flipping a sign. For that, he was thankful. He was not, thankful, however, when his alarm starting buzzing near his face, and
didn’t appreciate the ringtone he’d meticulously picked out prior. Akira hated getting up, but just like every school day, he forced his eyes open and silenced his cell phone, then stared at his cell phone in awe for a moment. That last thing was not on his daily routine, but he’d make the exception for the glowing, red eyeball icon that was wedged between two innocuous looking applications. He was fairly certain he had deleted the same icon when he noticed it during his transit to Tokyo, now it was back. He suspected a virus, or something similar, but was already too done with caring for today that he just dropped his phone on his bed and started getting dressed for school.

Once that was done, he removed his phone from its resting place and unlocked it. 7:30 it read, meaning he should have plenty of time to go to the station and make his way to school, his new school. The one that had, in not so many words, banned him from communicating. That school. Akira huffed out a sigh, then tugged on his shoes and grabbed his schoolbag, of which only his brand new whiteboard was held. Sakura-san was waiting behind the counter of Leblanc when he finally made it downstairs. He was starting to recognize a routine starting to form here, for there was, yet again, a plate of rice and curry on the bar, still steaming. His stomach actually lurched and growled, begging him to close the distance.

Naturally, he took what was designated as his seat at the bar, at least, for now, and ate his provided breakfast without question, and a quick sign of thank you, before he was ordered out of the café with the instructions to flip the sign. Akira shuddered.

Akira took his time walking to the Yongen-Jaya station, for it was only a short walk on a long journey, and it was cool outside, and quiet. Two things he valued in his strolls, but, soon enough, he was back on the vomit-inducing trains that Tokyo had to offer. On said train, he was forced to stand while people all but yelled in his ears about the increasing number of train incidents this year. Akira really hated trains now. He made it to Shibuya, along with an endless stream of people that kept bumping into him, in a very short time, considering the distance, and finally landed himself in the Shibuya Square.

Umm… His mind hummed, helpful as always. Shujin Academy is on a line. He knew that most, if not all destinations in Tokyo were connected to “a” line, he just wasn’t quite sure which he was supposed to be on to finish his journey. Akira sighed to himself, wondering why he didn’t ask Sakura-san for the correct transfer. But, fortunately, the internet was available as a resource in place to fix his stupid mistakes.

Thank God.

Tugging out his cell phone, he couldn’t help but notice, as it was fairly blatant, and a rather unnecessary irritation in his life, that, once again, there was a creepy eyeball in the center of his screen. He briefly considered rebooting the thing right there, but knew that time was of the essence, lest he be expelled for being tardy. A presumable outcome, he supposed, considering he was forbidden from even speaking while at school, save for writing things on a rather graciously provided whiteboard. He rolled his eyes while he loaded up his browser, fortunately, what line to get to Shujin? Was very commonly searched, and offered him instructions that were easy enough to follow. The Ginza Line would take him right to a station that was only two blocks away from Shujin. He followed the instructions and managed to find himself outside of what he dubbed, Shujin Station, but was actually just the fifth stop from entering the Ginza Line.

In the short time it took for him to go underground, board a train, and exit said train several stops later, it had begun to rain outside. Akira liked the rain, just only when he was inside, and not outside trying to not be late. He supposed it was to be expected, where everything went wrong in his life, a rather upsetting snowball effect. Rain on the first day of school, being banned from
talking, getting convicted falsely. He chalked it up to bad karma, even though, with the cherry blossom petals drifting in the wind as they were, the sight was really something to behold. An *inconvenient* sight, but a sight nevertheless.

Said sight was, unfortunately, blocked by a blob of neutral colors, but only for a few seconds. The blob took a place beside him under an awning, escaping getting completely soaked before the day even started. Akira stared at the rain again, but glanced at the blob next to him, watching them… *her*, take off her hood, revealing a *lot* of wavy—or was it curly?—blonde hair and blue eyes. A *foreigner*, he realized after a moment of *not* staring. She noticed this, as girls often did, and *not* stared back at him. She smiled, which was against custom, but he assumed that she didn’t know as much.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, their awkward *not* staring and breaking social constructs session was cut rather short by the arrival of a car and a rather big head sticking out of said car’s window. “Takamaki-chan! Want a ride to school? You’re gonna be late.”

“Um, sure.” Takamaki said, in *not* foreign.

The man with the big head turned to him next, Akira avoided eye contact, “Do you need a lift too?” Akira shook his head and his hands. He did *not* take rides from strangers, not that there were a lot of strangers where he was from, but this was Tokyo and he’d heard enough rumors and news reports. He hoped Takamaki would be okay.

Maybe I *should* have stopped her?

Akira did not have time to dwell on such things, as another blob came running past his field of vision, almost knocking into him. “Damn that pervy teacher!” The blob screamed, now in the same place Takamaki had been in moments ago. Akira blinked rapidly.

Pervy teacher? *Was* that man really…

He definitely reconsidered going back in time and stopping that girl from getting into that car. Unfortunately, he did not spontaneously adopt the power to rewind time and instead found himself staring at the new blob that had replaced Takamaki, which wasn’t that hard considering they both had yellow hair, though the new blob’s was considerably shorter.

“What do you want?” The blob said with a rather vicious tone as he began to approach him until their personal space was all but combined. “You plannin’ to rat me out to Kamoshida?” Akira blinked, again, as a result of this new blob. He kind of missed Takamaki, however brief her status as his awning acquaintance had been. He shook his head, finally realizing that he’d been asked a question, a rather forceful and confusing one, considering he no longer had personal space and didn’t know who Kamoshida was.

His confusion must have shown on his face, as his new blob elaborated, “In that car just then. That was Kamoshida.” *Ah*, he thought, stupidly, as the clues were there, he just hadn’t connected them.

“He does whatever the hell he wants.” The blond went on to say, “Who does he think he is? The king of a castle? Don’t you agree?” Akira blinked, again, unsure of how to respond with his rather limited articulations. He settled on a shrug after the blond stared at him, looking very insistent on a form of confirmation that Kamoshida, the guy in the car, was, in fact, holding the belief that he was the king of a high school. Akira supposed it could have been true, but he also supposed it could hold no truth and the blond just hated the guy.

“Wait-- You don’t know Kamoshida?” The blond asked, as if the silence were hurting him. He
shook his head. “You go to Shujin, though?” Another question, with an accusatory finger towards the Shujin symbol on his uniform. He noticed that the other boy had the same uniform, but with a shirt that could not be regulation underneath said uniform. “I’ve never seen you around…” The blond said, Akira assumed more to himself than him. Suddenly the blond’s eyes lit with realization, “Are you a transfer student?”

Akira thanked whatever God that may exist that, in all of his time in Japan, there was finally a yes-or-no question being asked towards him. He nodded, trying not to be too enthusiastic in said action.

“You’re kinda quiet, aren’t ya?” Another one. Akira almost smiled, perhaps the blond wasn’t so bad. He shrugged in response and the blond rolled his eyes before turning around. “The rain ain’t too bad now, we better hurry before we’re late.”

Akira didn’t even manage to take a step forward before everything started going wrong, yet again. A splitting, piercing, ringing pain enveloped his entire head and he cringed, feeling light-headed.

“Ahh!” The blond said, as if sharing his pain and being able to vocalize it. “My head hurts.” He added, sounding pained and annoyed. The blond sighed, “Dammit, I wanna go home.” Akira couldn’t have said it better himself, really, and followed after the blond through the rain.

The blond led him through an alleyway, a rather creepy one, he might add.

They didn’t get far before his companion felt the need to exclaim. “Whaa?” Akira moved forward, closing the distance between them. He supposed a whaa? Was an appropriate response, considering before them was a rather large, rather menacing looking castle. It was also night time, which it wasn’t mere moments ago, before they stepped into this alley, that is.

Maybe it’s cursed, he thought grimly, still staring at this rather random castle that had somehow hidden itself behind the alleyways of Tokyo.

“We didn’t come the wrong way, though.” The blond said, pointing to the alley of which they had both emerged, leading Akira to believe, that A. The castle before them was not supposed to be here and B. the alley was recently cursed.

However, carved in very neat script on a small wall in front of the castle was the title Shujin Academy. Akira briefly wondered how quickly a school could remodel, if it was possible to be an overnight process. Somehow, he doubted it.

The blond suggested they walk into the castle, well, not so much suggested it as much as beginning to walk towards the rather creepy entrance and Akira followed him. For all he knew, the back entrance to Shujin Academy could be a creepy castle that blocked out the sky. But, considering he didn’t see any other students, he assumed that not to be the case.

“That’s… weird. Where’s the school?” The blond said, gazing around the rather large foyer of a random castle inside of Tokyo as if Shujin Academy might just jump out from behind a corner like a playful kitten.

“It said Shujin on that gate, didn’t it?” Akira nodded in response, beginning to look around for a cat version of Shujin that was supposed to exist in this exact spot. The blond pulled out his cell phone, something Akira should have considered doing previously. Clearly, the internet had lied in its directions or something. He blamed the hacker, wishing, not for the first time, he had the power to go back in time and reboot his phone before looking up vital instructions.

“No service.” The blond said, annoyed but also a bit worried. Akira was also a bit worried, but how
obvious that was remained unknown to him.

Fortunately, he did not have time to consider the aspects of his face before something else happened, a rather hunched individual hobbled over to them, stopping right in front of the blond. Akira had the worst feeling about this hunched individual, for not only was he a hunchback, but also happened to be in a full set of metal armor and carrying with him, or her, a large shield and sword.

Ah, he thought, as two possibilities came to mind. This was either the Shujin mascot, or he was going to die. Then a third option, he was, yet again, dreaming about something weird.

“Geez, you freaked me out!” The blond said, taking a step back. “Who’re you? Are you a student?” The rather unlikely theory, at least in his mind, that Shujin Academy was using a soldier with a sword and shield as their mascot became slightly more plausible, judging from the ease at which The blond so casually spoke to this new… blob. He should really start learning the names of his blobs, he would do that later.

“That costume is impressive… Is that armor real?” The gleam indicated, to Akira, that it was at least. Which would explain why the person in front of him was hunched over, standing quite similarly to the blond, now that he noticed it.

“Don’t just stand there! Say somethin’!” The blond said, looking, yet again, annoyed. Another of what he was starting to assume was not, in fact, Shujin’s mascot appeared, rather suddenly next to Blob-3. Akira hoped that he didn’t have to get into double digits with his blobs on his first day.

Blob-3 took a step forward and the blond seemed to realize the gravity of the situation.

“Calm down, man!” The blond stammered out, looking completely frazzled. “We gotta run!” He said, now looking directly at him. Akira nodded, frowning.

“Stop standin’ around then!” The blond shouted, bolting off towards the exit, only for more steel-coated blobs to block his path. Akira sighed, he didn’t even get the chance to run before he was surrounded. In all, he supposed he should have been more surprised at the situation that he had landed himself in, but his life really wasn’t going well right now, and while this was certainly unexpected as a scenario, he assumed that, eventually, at least within his first week in Tokyo, something equally as bad would have happened.

Akira watched as the blond got knocked to the ground with a large, non-mascot regulated, at least he assumed not, shield. At least he wouldn’t die alone, he realized, bitter but relieved as they were slowly cowed into a small circle of blobs.

“Oww! What the hell! You’re gonna break my damn bones.” The blond said from the ground, still not fully aware, it seems, of their impending possible deaths. He wondered when he’d turned into such a pessimist.

“Take them away!” A blob shouted, though he wasn’t sure which number it was, for he had lost count when one of said blobs decided to now beat him with a shield also. He lost consciousness very quickly, with a smile on his face, hoping that he’d wake up in the attic of Leblanc and that there was lest dust occupying his living space.

Unfortunately, what his new, new living space lacked in dust, made up for in leaking ceilings, an uncomfortable bed, very little light, and a roommate. Said roommate had woken him up moments
ago, asking about his health and other such things. Akira shrugged for all of his answers and started to look around the room.

“Doors locked.” The blond said, helpfully, kicking at said locked door which was made of iron bars. At least they had a nice ventilation in their living quarters, he just really wished there was more than one bed, and that they weren’t locked in here. That, he supposed, would be lovely, but unlikely. He could also do without the random screams of, he wasn’t actually sure what emotions the screams released, pain perhaps? Suffering, most likely.

“What the shit?” The blond said, frantic now, and clearly starting to lose it. A crazy roommate was not his preference. He, in a rare attempt, put his hand on the blond’s shoulder and patted him, trying to calm him. It didn’t work. The blond shrugged him off and started screaming also, before, finally, suggesting they look for another way out. He looked, he searched, but found nothing; and judging from the grim expression that the blond had taken up, it would seem the other boy hadn’t found a method for their miraculous exit.

I… Akira thought, should be freaking out right now. Yet he wasn’t, yet he was the calm one of the two while they shared a cell in the basement of a random castle in the middle of Tokyo. The situation did not seem to make a lick of sense, at all, whatsoever. He did, however, come to the conclusion, that he felt rather bad about dragging the blond to a rather untimely demise for daring to interact with him. Perhaps the verdict was right. He was nothing but trouble to everyone around him. He moped after that, taking a seat on the bed.

“Wait… you hear that?” The blond said after a long period of waiting, one in which Akira briefly considered a nap but decided against it. He did not hear that, though. Until he did, but by the time that came around he could already see that. More blobs were standing outside of their cell.

“Your punishment has been decided upon.” One of the guards said. Akira sighed, he didn’t really want another punishment, day one of his probation was already going very poorly. “You charge is Unlawful Entry. Thus you will be sentenced to death.”

Not good, he thought, rather idly as he continued to stare at the floor of his cell.

“Say what!?” The blond exclaimed, only to be interrupted.

“No one is allowed to do as they please in my castle.” A familiar voice said as a large head appeared in front of the door to their cell. That teacher… Akira realized, wondering if he had disposed of Blob—Takamaki before coming here.

“Is that you Kamoshida?” The blond asked, pressing his face against the bars as if to get a better look of the man directly in front of him. The real view, Akira thought anyways, was from a distance. Where Kamashida was wearing a creepy cape and pink panties. With nothing else. He shuddered, ungrateful for his first true reaction to the situation he was forced to endure.

Kamoshida started talking, clearly riling the blond, whose name he learned to be Sakamato, at least, if the guy wearing panties were to be believed.

Blob—Sakamato banged on the bars of their cell, the riling obviously getting to him. “Fuck you, you pervert!”

“It’s time for an execution!” Kamoshida said gleefully in response, waving his arms widely, exposing even more of himself that Akira would rather not have.

The door was unlocked. The guards stepped in.
Sakamato apologized to him as both their necks were met with cold, heavy steel.

*He’s sorry?* Akira wondered, staring at the blade that about to plunge into his companion’s neck.

*This is truly an unjust game. A voice rang out, stunning him more than the heavy hands of Kamoshida’s guards could. His skin prickled cold. Your chances of winning are almost none…*

The voice, both ancient and new funneled directly into his head, bypassing his ears completely, it was surprising, but even more so was the glimmering blue butterfly that was appearing before him. It glowed in front of him and…

*But if my voice is reaching you, there may be yet a possibility open to you…*

His brain vibrated and a new voice rang out inside of him. His own voice, though he had never heard it before, his *self*.

*What’s the matter…? Are you simply going to watch?* He didn’t know. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t do… anything. Couldn’t save that girl then, and he couldn’t save Sakamato now.

*Are you forsaking him to save yourself?* The voice accused. He was weak. He doubted he could even save himself…

*Death awaits him if you do nothing.* He knew that but…

*Was your previous decision a mistake then?* Against his will, he was thrown back to that moment, reliving it in milliseconds, that woman, being harassed by a drunken shadow… It wasn’t. He knew it was the right thing to do!

*Very well. I have heeded your resolve.*

*Vow to me!*

His skin burned. Everything… burned. He’d never felt so much pain at once.

*I am thou, thou art I…*

*Thou who art willing to perform all sacrilegious acts for thine own justice.*

*Call upon my name, and release thy rage!*

The burning continued, amplifying in each moment, swallowing him whole but… awakening something, a deeper part of him that didn’t exist because it was *him*.

*Show thy strength of thy own will to ascertain all on thine own, though thou be chained to Hell itself!*

A sword rose against him.

*He erupted.*

First came the wind, a cyclone from his wings of rebellion.

The chains threw themselves against him, trying to quell him. Akira grabbed at his face, the chains, *the mask of the weak*. He purged them, tugging with all of his might, with all of his will, along with the mask came the skin around his eyes, letting blood flow freely into his vision. He supposed he should have been blinded, but things had never been clearer. To either of them.
Then came the fire, which purged those against his justice. Giant, engulfing pillars of flame rose out of him, brighter than hell itself, of that he was certain. Kamoshida backed away from him.

Akira grinned.

With a flick of his hands, he sent the guards, mere insects before his wrath flying across the cell, slamming them into the walls. But not Kamoshida, he’d do much, much worse.

Then the voice came, a scream really. Coming from him, from Akira, the mute boy. The one who’d been silenced.

“Arsene!”

Chapter End Notes

Leave a review :)
Chapter Two

It had to be a dream, there was no other possibilities, and no other outcome that could explain what had just unfolded. Akira watched the demons, for that was the only word that seem apt to describe them, turn to dust under the power of—his power. The one Arsene, and that voice, had bestowed upon him. The fact that he was able to speak, let alone yell, was a dead giveaway to the fact that what was happening before him, the sweat trickling down his forehead, the undeniable euphoria that came with the notion of murdering Kamoshida right now, was all a work of fantasy. It was all in his head. Akira could not talk, violence did not turn him on, and he could be sweating, but that would be from his blanket being too thick. He was still at Leblanc, in the attic, he just knew it.

Blob—Sakamoto was a work of fiction, a bystander he could have seen years ago and just happened to be remembered by his unconscious. Of course, it was a very detailed dream, or nightmare, and his sense of self was still intact, though he could not ever recall having the desire to purchase and equip a leather trench coat and gloves the color of blood. That wasn’t even to mention the thing that had spawned behind him when his contract was formed.

Arsene was, aesthetically speaking, very beautiful. In a strange way. Ancient, definitely. Magnificent. Truly so. The entity emitted waves of something intoxicating. This aroma of power, something Akira knew he lacked. There was confidence there as well, another concept he was completely unaligned with. Not even to mention the ability to speak. His other self. His ideal self. He wanted to be like Arsene; to become Arsene. But first...

Sakamoto wasted no time in recovering from Akira’s distraction. The blond swept to his feet, though not without some stumbling, and grabbed a ring of keys that had, most likely, fallen from the clutches of the, now disintegrated, guards. Akira knew instantly what the other boy was up to, and didn’t hesitate to get himself out of harm’s way as Sakamoto locked Kamoshida, or whoever it was, inside of the cell they’d previously occupied. Arsene’s form, that of a vengeful angel, hovered above the both of them, his face, though made of shadow and flame, looking pleased. Though, he supposed, since Arsene had come out of him, he’d more acclimated to his emotions; if he had emotions, that is. Akira brought himself back to the present once he heard a sigh of relief from Sakamoto.

“What… What was that? Just now?” The blond said, looking between him and the man they’d just locked in a cell. Hopefully they wouldn’t get detention from this, or expelled, in his case.

Akira looked at Arsene.

Arsene looked back at him, then cleared his throat before he began speaking in a voice that should have been too deep to sound as elegant as it did.

“I am the rebel’s soul that resides within you. This ordeal,” Arsene lifted one of his incredibly long
Arms and pointed a crooked finger at Kamoshida, “Caused me to awaken.” Disappointment flooded him. Arsene’s voice was the same that he thought he was using, the voice he thought he’d spoken with.

“Who the hell are you?” A voice rang out, drawing Akira from yet another stupor. Kamoshida seemed to have finally recovered and was standing at the bars of his new cell, the cape-clad man was glaring at each of them with sinister yellow eyes.

Arsene laughed. The sound caused Sakamoto to squeak from beside him.

“My other me… is The Pillager of Twilight?” Each word was punctuated and Akira took a moment to grind the words over in his brain.

My other me… is The Pillager of Twilight?

That didn’t make any sense, nothing about this dream did.

“Then… explain the clothes!” Sakamoto said, taking a step away from all of them while pointing an accusatory finger at Akira. Again, he glanced down at his red-clad hands, the same color as Arsene’s overcoat, further connecting them. He offered nothing but a shrug to the other boy, Arsene also remained silent, still hovering and still on fire. Sakamoto scratched his head, the gears in his head clearly overworked by all of the information Akira’s dream had presented to him.

“Woah–!” Sakamoto exclaimed, pulled out of his silence as Akira, once again, erupted in flame, revealing his Shujin uniform. “It… went back to normal.”

“Let’s… get of here,” Sakamoto said, winding his arm back to throw the keys in his hand towards an unknown destination. “Before anything else catches on fire.”

Akira watched the glittering as the object sank into the rushing river that divided the prison in half. He then looked to Arsene, the thing that was… also him, was still watching Kamoshida as the speedo-clad man thrashed about, looking for all intents like a wild beast.

“If you need me,” Arsene said, still watching the trapped man-beast, “Call upon me.” With that, the winged figure vanished, causing Sakamoto to make another strange noise.

“Akira turned towards the stranger and nodded, letting Sakamoto lead them away from a prison that was, most definitely, not Shujin Academy.

They snaked past the guards with minimal difficulty, a surprising feat considering how hard both of them were breathing and how much noise Akira’s heart was making all of a sudden. He never was one for running, or violence, typically. He also supposed that it could have to do with the number of other high school students that were stuck behind iron bars, just like he and Sakamoto were several minutes ago.

Unfortunately, their path had just reached its end when they stumbled upon a wall of wooden planks, such a wall was supposed to be laying flat, allowing them to cross, but that was not the case.

Maybe... he shouldn’t have thrown those keys... Akira thought, rather put off, but not blaming Sakamoto, for he’d probably do something similar. Then another voice rang out, one too high in pitch to be Arsene, Sakamoto, or even Kamoshida. There was also a distinct lack of clanking that would indicate one of the prison’s guards.
“Hey!” The voice said, again, “Blondie! Frizzy hair! Look over here!” The voice squeaked. Akira twitched, his hair was not frizzy, it was fluffy. Fluffy! Sighing, Akira walked towards the source of the voice, which was, unsurprisingly, from the confines of one of the cells. He couldn’t help but wonder why none of the other inmates were calling out to them, besides this one. When he finally got to the cell, where he thought he’d heard the noise, he gazed around the stone confines only to find four blank walls.

Then he looked down.

Another demon? He couldn’t help but wonder, crouching down to look at the thing that resembled a cat. One with a very large head.

Sakamoto uttered another noise, one of disbelief, “Wh-What is this thing?” He shrieked, expressing Akira’s thoughts perfectly.

“You’re not guards here, right? Get me out of here!” The cat-thing said, looking pitiful and pleading with its enormous eyes.

“You’re not guards here, right? Get me out of here!” The cat-thing said, looking pitiful and pleading with its enormous eyes.

“Look!” It said, pointing its, Akira was hesitant to call it a paw, appendage towards the nearby wall, where another set of keys was hanging. “The key is right there!”

“We’re trying to get the hell out of here!” Sakamoto exploded, not even having made an attempt at freeing the thing. “You look like one of those things, too!” He supposed it was a fair argument, there was something strange about a cat with a head this big. A big head that called his hair frizzy, of all things.

“I’m locked up here, so how can I be your enemy?” Again, a fair point, it did look harmless enough, then Akira remembered Kamoshida was a number of cells away, also locked up and also an enemy. He hesitated.

“Help meowt!” The thing cried, sounding like a child.

Metallic clanking shied into Akira’s sense, and presumably Sakamoto’s as well since the boy tensed up from ankle to neck and was looking very similar to the wall of planks that prevented their escape.

The thing seemed to sense he was getting nowhere with Sakamoto and turned to him instead, it grinned before speaking, “You guys wanna know where the exit is?” Akira instantly recognized the statement for what it was, bargaining. He glanced at Sakamoto, who was looking down the long passage they’d come from, guards were now littering it and were headed towards them. Seeming to sense his stare, the blond twisted his neck; they made real eye contact for the first time sense meeting, Akira could see a plethora of emotions, all negative and fear-induced, he hoped his own gaze was devoid of those things, despite how frightened he was feeling on the inside. In sync, or close enough, they turned towards the thing in the cell.

“You better not be lying.” Sakamoto said, pushing his hands into his pockets in a gesture that should have been casual, but looked incredibly anxious. Akira nodded, doing his best at a stern gaze at the beast.

“If you guys think you can escape on your own, then be my guest.” The thing replied. Akira noticed that it hadn’t stepped back from the cell, if anything it leaned forward. Unfortunately, they didn’t have time to be calling each other’s bluffs. Swiftly, he grabbed the heavy keys from where they were hanging and unlocked the cell.
“Dude!” Sakamoto screeched, looking ready to put the cat-beast as it triumphantly swaggered out of its cell. Akira, once again, had nothing to offer but a shrug, even if Sakamoto knew JSL, he doubt his hands would cooperate, he’d barely managed to get his arms to work to release the cat.

“Now where’s the exit, you monster cat?” Sakamoto ordered, glaring at the now free beast.

Instantly, the thing’s face turned sour, “Don’t call me a cat! I am Morgana!” It yelled, not even attempting to lower its voice in the face of impending doom.

“Just get us out of here.” Sakamoto said, sounding equally as sour, but, thankfully, keeping his voice low.

“A-Alright, sheesh.” The thing, Morgana, stammered out, before sauntering away from the two of them, “Just follow me and stay quiet.” Akira rolled his eyes at the irony.

Sakamoto turned to him, irritation now clouding the fear that had been embedded into his expression, “Guess we just gotta follow it.” He said, running after the beast.

Morgana stopped in front of the wall of planks that should be making a bridge, he and Sakamoto also stopped.

“It seems,” Morgana began, ears twitching wildly, “That this statue somehow lowers the bridge.” The cat-thing turned around, facing the two of them, “Well? Do you want to be caught by the guards?” Morgana snapped rudely, “Get to work!”

Akira stared at the statue of Kamoshida before them, unsettled by its likeness to the real thing. Its eyes glowed yellow, presumably with some type of gem. Might as well, he thought, jabbing his finger into one of the statue’s eye sockets, then the other, then both, only to be met with stony resistance.

Sakamoto tried the nose, yanking it either which way, then stuck his fingers inside the nostrils. Also to no avail.

Morgana, being the shortest of them all, examined the base of the statue, circling around it and blindly feeling with its furry appendages.

Akira went to the mouth, attempting to twist the lips, then poking at Kamoshida’s stony smile. The jaw twitched, then rose back up a millimeter to its original position. Akira grinned smugly, how could he not. Wiggling his fingers between Kamoshida’s teeth only proved his theory.

With a swift downwards yank, Akira dislodged the statue’s jaw, as well as the bridge. The planks were lowered by a pulley and slapped noisily onto the stone path on the other side of the river, allowing them passage.

“Woah!” Exclaimed Sakamoto, stepping away to examine the now prone bridge. “How were we supposed to know to do that?” He asked, eyes widening as if something wonderful had just happened. Which it did, Akira just wasn’t one to question their fortune at the moment.

Morgana snorted from below them, “Amateurs.” Then continued with, “Let’s keep going.” With little other option, he and Sakamoto followed Morgana across the bridge.

Unfortunately, as they were about to head towards what was presumably the exit, another guard burst through it and immediately its attention was on them.

“Shit!” Sakamoto said, stumbling backwards, “It’s another one of them!”
With another insult, Morgana leapt forward confidently, standing as a very small shield between the set of armor and Sakamoto. “You can fight, right?” It said, looking over at him with its enormous eyes. Akira nodded, also stepping forward.

“Alright then!” Morgana said, taking another step towards the guard.

“What!?” He yelled, “Zorro!”

To his, rather slight, amusement, and actual awe, Morgana also erupted into a pillar of blue flames, spawning a burlesque, floating entity. It gave off a feeling very similar to Arsene’s, though it affected him much less.

“Y-You got one of those things, too?” Sakamoto asked, still on the floor behind them.

Morgana’s actions, or perhaps Sakamoto’s words, though he doubted it, caused the guard to shed its armor and reveal their true form.

Akira stepped forward, standing beside his new companion and tried his best to also erupt in flame, only to find that his clothes changed and nothing else. Why isn’t it working? He questioned, staring towards Morgana, who was flinging off spells while also managing to goad him in between.

He tried concentrating.

He tried meditating.

He tried reciting Arsene’s contract, what he remembered of it, inside his own head. Anything to call him forth.

Akira swallowed, he’d be pretty useless without Arsene right now. Sure he could strike at them with his newly-acquired knife, but he wasn’t very strong. He needed Arsene. He needed his other self.

My other self…

It clicked, then.

Arsene was just another part of him, he didn’t meditate to use his legs, didn’t recite contracts to take a piss, he just did those things! He could do this, as well.

With that, Akira took another step forward, towards their adversaries, the ones trying to kill him. Their gazes narrowed at him and he cocked his hand forward, taking a moment to admire the quality of his gloves, then snapped.

Instantly, Arsene’s presence flooded the battlefield. Gigantic wings hovered over him, making wind whip at his hair and clothes. Arsene snapped as well, and instantly one of the enemies before him was ensnared in black something, fire, presumably, by the way it caused the thing to crumble into nothing.

Morgana gaped from beside him, Akira noticed, the cat was no longer flinging spells for the both of them. Though, it was no longer needed as Akira, with the aid of his other self, instantly annihilated the monsters before them.

“You have a persona, also?” Morgana asked, leaving Akira completely complexed.

Persona? The word, foreign though familiar. He felt that was a rather apt description for what
Arsene was. *Persona,* he thought again, feeling quite giddy at finally naming the other part of him.

Akira nodded, Zorro and Arsene seemed to have spawned from *them,* and Morgana seemed to know more about Personas than he did. He didn’t decide to question it; not that a cat could possibly know JSL anyway.

“It’s pretty powerful!” Morgana complimented, a toothy grin taking up most of its face now.

“…Persona?” Sakamoto asked, finally back on his feet. “You mean the things that come out of you guys all dramatic-like?” Akira sniffed, now that he thought about it, an elegant looking thing spawning from a lot of fire could be *considered* dramatic to some people.

Morgana turned towards the blond, Akira kept his ears open, also eager for the information.

“Yes! You saw how Frizzy Hair,” Akira twitched, “here ripped off his mask when he summoned it, right?” Sakamoto nodded, still looking thoroughly confused.

“Well, everyone wears a mask deep within their heart. By removing that…” Suddenly, and yet again, Akira was enveloped in bursts of blue fire, removing his crimson gloves with them.

“Oh...” Morgana said, stopping himself from his previous explanation, “It doesn’t look like you have full control over your transformation, yet.” If anything, the cat sounded disappointed. Akira shrugged in response, there wasn’t really anything he could do about that.

“This shit doesn’t make any sense.” Sakamoto said, impatient once more.

Morgana’s huge eyes rolled in their sockets, “Will you just listen, Blondie.” Akira watched as Sakamoto twitched in response.

“My name ain’t Blondie. It’s Ryuji.”

Akira blinked, *Ryuji could be a family name also. So was Kamoshida lying? Or is it Sakamoto Ryuji?* He couldn’t help but wonder why he’d offer his given name to a stranger, if that was the case. It was odd.

*Everything about this is odd,* he amended.

“It’s not much further to the exit.” Morgana said suddenly, dissolving the previous conflict.

Morgana guided them back to the familiar entrance hall that they’d entered from, only to find the front door locked when Ryuji rammed his shoulder against it.

“Dammit!”

Morgana looked less than impressed, gesturing with its furry appendage towards a nearby duct. “That’s your exit.” It said flatly. “It leads straight outside.” It tacked on a moment later.

Ryuji nodded, ripped the cover off and climbed inside of it before turning back to Morgana. “Ain’t you comin?” He asked. Akira walked towards the shaft, then glanced towards Morgana, who shook its giant head.

“I’ve got other things to check out here.” It said cryptically. “We’re going our separate ways.”

Uncomfortably, Akira turned towards Morgana and straightened to his full height, then bowed respectfully to the beast. Morgana laughed, then shoed him off with a wave of his appendage.
The tunnel wasn’t that long of a crawl, but it was cold and dusty. Sakamoto/Ryuji, having crawled first and thus gotten the worst of it, sneezed at least five times before they finally managed to find the end of the shaft.

Once they were both on the ground, they ran away from the castle without further heckling or trouble from anything. Sakamoto lead them across the giant drawbridge, through the alleyways that they’d come through and found themselves in the middle of a sidewalk in Tokyo. The gloom that seemed into every particle in the castle was no longer weighing him down, additionally, the sun was also a thing again, casting bright beams upon them as they finally allowed themselves to stop running.

“You’ve returned to the real world. Welcome back.” A robotic voice echoed from the confines of Akira’s pocket.

“Returned?” Sakamoto questioned from beside him. The blond boy was still panting, holding his hands to his thighs and bent forward. “Does that mean we got away?” He added, turning his head to look up at Akira. He, as part of a regrettably forming habit, shrugged.

Real world… He wondered. Real would imply that there was a fake world of some sort. One where it was dark during the day. One where beasts and monsters appeared where there shouldn’t be. It was very strange, he was certain that it had been a dream, yet he remained conscious. He glanced around the still busy streets of Tokyo, all the noise made him anxious but other than that, it seemed rather mundane, aside from the sheer number of people, obviously. Akira tugged his brain past his anxieties of the real world and tried to focus on the not-real world. Unfortunately, too many theories were possible and with no information to prove it, he was left with nothing substantial outside of wild speculation.

His phone offered some interesting evidence, however. The ominous red eye was taking up half of his screen, options lingered below it. Return? Was at the top.

No thank you. Akira thought, closing the app, hopefully for the last time, and removing the eye from his screen.

“Cutting classes are we?” A smug voice toned, pulling him out of his thoughts and filling his stomach with dread.

Not good, not good, not good!

Sakamoto had them covered as far as a response went, which was a good start for preventing him from getting expelled on his first day.

I didn’t even make it to the school… maybe I really am a delinquent.

“N-no, we were trying to go to school, but then we ended up at this weird castle!” Akira flinched. To any normal person – normal being defined as someone who has lived in Tokyo long enough to know that there were no cursed alleyways and that there were no castles between said alleyways, they were sure to sound crazy.

“…What?” The person responded, Akira took this moment to get a look at who exactly had approached them.

Police, unfortunately.

The officer sighed, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else than… wherever they were. “Hand over your bags. You better not being doing any drugs.”
Akira sighed, wishing his companion had gone for a more believable, albeit false, excuse, but judging from the pinkness in Sakamoto’s cheeks, the other boy wasn’t very good at being put on the spot. He had to give it to Sakamoto though, for the other boy could actually respond verbally, and Akira couldn’t. He let the straps of his bag slide down his arm and into the folds of his fingers; he could only comply.

The other officer, the one that wasn’t yelling at them, took Akira’s bag and unzipped it quickly. Akira watched while listing off the contents of the bag in his head, unfortunately, he’d forgotten one thing.

“A dry-erase board?” The less-aggressive officer asked, casting his wary gaze onto him, as if owning a dry-erase board was a crime of some sort. He really hoped it wasn’t. He nodded, attempting to look meek or innocent. The officer scrubbed his chin with his hand.

“Why do you need this?” He asked, slowly, as if in the span of his previous question, the boy before him had lost over 100 IQ points.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t really a question that could be answered with a simple shake of his head or his now frequent shrug. He gulped, suddenly uncertain, and glanced at Sakamoto, who was busy glaring at the other officer as he tipped his schoolbag over onto the sidewalk.

Quickly as he could, he used his hands to communicate, his primary method, something that was banned in a place of learning, and unpractical in his new home.

“I am mute.” His hands indicated in place of his mouth. Something in the cop’s demeanor changed, as if he were suddenly the one to lose 100 IQ points. Akira swallowed again, unsure of what he should be doing while waiting for a response. His last, and only, run in with the police had landed him in an over-sized cell.

“Uh…” The man uttered, jaw agape after the syllable had ended, then the officer’s brain came alive again and he shoved the dry-erase board at him, then continued digging through the bag until a marker was removed as well, that too was shoved in his direction. The actions seemed to have drawn the other officer’s attention, and subsequently, Sakamoto’s, as they were both staring at him and his dry-erase board as if it were an alien artifact.

“Dude…” Sakamoto said, in awe but also very confused.

“Quiet!” The more aggressive of the two officers shouted before turning to his partner. “Why’d ya give him that?” He questioned, loud and obviously irritated at the supposed slight of his dominance.

It wasn’t often that Akira was embarrassed at his inability to verbally communicate, but when the nicer of the two officers said, “I think the kid’s deaf.” He couldn’t help the burning in his neck and cheeks, especially when his companion began to gape at him with wide-eyes and an open mouth.

Fortunately, the oversight was something he could use to his advantage, as he wasn’t lying to the officers by neither denying or confirming, technically. He’d play along with their suspicions, for now.

Akira uncapped the marker and began writing.

**Do you know the way to Shujin Academy? We are lost.**

The two officers stared at the dry-erase board, then at Akira. The aggressive one growled, but kept his mouth shut, knowing that yelling at him would fall upon, speculated, deaf ears. The polite
officer nodded, began to say something, then closed his mouth.

The two officers looked at each other, then at him. The pity in their stares was unmistakable and Akira settled for staring at the concrete between their feet instead, it was easier that way.

They guided him and Sakamoto back to Shujin Academy, two blocks away from where they’d escaped from Shujin Castle. He, the two officers, and a silent Sakamoto were outside the gates to Shujin in less than fifteen minutes. They stood there awkwardly, the officers anyway, Akira stood there silently, and Sakamoto was still staring at him.

The more polite officer turned to Sakamoto then, and gave something of a smile, as if wanting to apologize after making fun of him.

“It was nice of you to offer to show,” The officer glanced at him, as if to make sure he was, in fact, not listening, “Someone like him, to school, but, “ His grin grew wider, “Make sure you know the way first.” Then a laugh, the other officer laughed, Sakamoto tried to laugh. He remained quiet, a silent observer to affair he wasn’t supposed to hear.

Akira, despite everything, put on an obnoxiously wide smile for the two officers, then bowed several times, as if showing how grateful someone like him truly was for their amazing help. He only, to his surprise, grinded his teeth a little bit before the two officers laughed again, then strode away from the gates of Shujin.

If he hadn’t been a fan of officers beforehand, he really wasn’t one now.

Someone like him. Akira glared at the steps of Shujin as he walked up them, striding past Sakamoto, who still remained silent.

It was between classes when he finally made it to the second floor of the school and his homeroom teacher was in the hallway, looking less than impressed that he had showed up.

Kawakami let out a big sigh when he finally approached her, “Unbelievable…” She uttered, something he figured that wasn’t supposed to be heard by his ears. “Come with me.” She said lowly, already walking past him. Akira complied to authority, as usual. He really, really hoped he wouldn’t be expelled.

The faculty office was almost empty, save for two other teachers who were chatting between taking sips from their matching coffee cups. Kawakami lead him to what was presumably her desk, she took a seat and took a moment to stare at him.

“Why were you late?” She demanded simply.

He hesitated, only for a moment, before tugging out the dry-erase board the school had so graciously gave him, and began writing how he’d gotten lost.

“But you came here yesterday.” She accused, looking only half suspicious around her apparent boredom.

Akira explained that it was his first time riding on the train system, and that Sakamoto was helping him find his way to the school.

Something in Kawakami’s expression turned bitter at the mention of the blond boy, but she kept asking him question and he did his best to fabricate his story to something believable.

The conversation was slow on his part, as he wasn’t used to writing with a marker as his primary
method of communication, but it seemed Kawakami, either through excessive boredom or his believable story, believed him enough not to expel him instantly.

Thank goodness.

He regretted lying to a teacher, but with his future on the mind, Akira found that it didn’t weigh too heavily on his conscious.

Kawakami signed something with his name at the top, then stood back up and exited the room, he followed, certain that he’d be expelled instantly for being in the faculty office without good reason.

“Just… don’t interrupt class, please.” She said right before the entrance to class, “I’ll introduce you to the class, then you’ll take your seat. Got it?” Akira nodded. “And… one more thing,” She began, turning her voice lower, “Don’t get involved with Sakamoto-kun, alright? He’s nothing but trouble.” Again, Akira found himself nodded, even as he was questioning the statement in his head.

Was it Sakamoto that caused that castle to appear? The possibility seemed slim, but then he couldn’t help but wonder what trouble Sakamoto could cause if not for that.

Kawakami guided him into the class and he took his place at the front of the room, trying his best to look as normal as possible. Immediately the room was filled with loud whispering, all concerning him, the criminal delinquent. Apparently he killed someone with his own hands, according to the two girls in the front.

“Settle down…” Kawakami somehow managed to sound bored, even when yelling, “This is a transfer student, Kurusu-kun, he is late because… he wasn’t feeling well. Additionally, Kurusu-kun cannot speak, so his responses will be written… if you have any question for him.”

Akira bowed to the class, showing that he had at least one manner, before turning back to Kawakami, who was looking around the classroom. “Your seat will be… over there.” The teacher pointed towards the back part of the room, next to the window.

Following the teacher’s instructions, he scampered towards his assigned seat quickly, more unsettled by the stares of his peers than he thought he’d be. On his way to said seat, however, he noticed another shock of blonde.

Takamaki, formerly known as Blob-1!

He wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing that at least one familiar face was in his class.

She gaped at him as he walked past he desk, wearing a very similar face to that of Sakamoto when he… found out.

Was it really that strange? He wondered, surely Tokyo had at least one other mute person for these people to have met before.

School was dismissed after that class, due to the trouble with the trains, or something. He really wished Tokyo was small enough to walk from destination to destination, he wasn’t partial to the thought of dying in a cramped, high-speed death wagon.

Kawakami stopped him as he was about to make his exit from the class with a bored call of his name. Instantly, he turned around and approached her desk.

“Please do not make this a habit, Kurusu-kun, you’re lucky you weren’t expelled instantly after the police called about two students being lost on the streets. It also seems that the class already knows
about your record, but I’m not the one who told them.” She looked a little uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as he felt with that information just being spread around, though, not that he thought about it, the principal probably had an entire assembly geared around a delinquent transferring to Shujin and to not make friends with him. Kawakami continued speaking, “Also, you should probably head straight home after this, Sakura-san did not sound happy when I called him.” He wondered when the teacher even had time to call his temporary guardian, but nodded, feeling nervous at the thought of provoking the already irritable man.

Akira nodded, making to heed her advice when she stopped him another time.

“And, about earlier, really, do not get involved with Sakamoto-kun, he’s nothing but trouble.” She glanced at him, then sighed again. “It’ll just cause more trouble for everyone; anyway, you’re dismissed.”

He nodded once more, then finally exited the classroom, only to bump into Sakamoto guarding the stairwell. He thought about ignoring his previous companion, considering Kawakami’s warning, but the blond boy had noticed him already, and lunged forward, grabbing onto the sleeve of his uniform and began dragging him up the stairs of Shujin.

The roof wasn’t exactly the most impressive place he’d ever been, which made him wonder why the other boy had dragged him up here anyway. He kind of hoped it was to finally put him out of his misery. That clearly wasn’t the case when Sakamoto whirled around and shoved a folded piece of paper in his hand.

The hand writing was awful, but it wasn’t the first thing he noticed. It was the crossed out words at the top of the page that drew his attention, then the rest of the note.

Dude,

Sorry about earlier.

I didn’t know you were deaf.

Don’t be mad or hate me or anything

-Ryuji.

Akira wasn’t sure how to respond to that, exactly. He’d responded to Sakamoto’s verbal queues in that castle enough times for the boy to surely have been aware that he was, in fact, not deaf. Still, he pulled out his own writing tools and began writing.

I’m not deaf.

I just can’t talk.

Sakamoto’s face went through a variety of emotions then finally landed on acceptance.

“So you can hear me?” Akira shook his head, grinning.

Sakamoto rolled his eyes at him, “Come on, dude. Anyway, I didn’t come up here just to apologize, or whatever, I wanted to talk about that castle thing, and how we almost died!” He nodded, also curious.

“Yes you remember it too?” He asked loudly, taking a seat on a vacant desk on the other side of the roof.
He nodded, confirming that they’d both remembered something that shouldn’t have been real.

“So it wasn’t a dream…” Sakamoto muttered, chewing on his thumb in thought.

“Which means… You saved me from Kamoshida.” Sakamoto grinned then, rubbing at his blond hair with an idle hand, “So, thanks I guess, I mean, if it was real, that is.”

“There’s rumors about him, ya know?” The blond began, leaning forward and lowering his voice, “Well, about you too. Is it true though? That you have a criminal record?”

Akira nodded, feeling uncomfortable for confirming any rumors, but knowing they’d spread regardless of what he did or didn’t say. To his surprise, Sakamoto laughed, “No wonder you were so ballsy!” He jaunted, as if Akira’s one charge was actually a long life of crime that had left him devoid of fear, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Anyways, back to Kamoshida,” Even the mention of the name caused Sakamoto’s face to scrunch up in irritation, “The way he was king of that castle, it almost felt real, like it was the actual Kamoshida… with the way he acts around school, they’re pretty much the same. Asshole.”

“D’you think we can get back to that castle?” Sakamoto asked suddenly, making Akira’s head spin.

He wants to go back? The question was incredulous, the request was nothing but a death wish, if it wasn’t for that cat-thing they’d be, quite likely, mounted on Kamoshida’s walls right now.

“N-nevermind, that’s stupid.” Sakamoto sighed, standing up.”Anyways, that’s all I gotta say, besides, I think we’re gonna get along just fine as two troublemakers.”

“I’m Sakamoto Ryūji, by the way. You can call me Ryūji” Ryuji smiled at him brightly as he introduced himself. Akira couldn’t fight the rush of heat that swam in his cheeks; he’d never been one for given-name basis, as he didn’t have many close friends, and for Sakamoto to just give him permission to do so… it was, to say the least, a bit overwhelming.

Akira wrote his name down for… Ryūji, on the white board, reluctantly offering the option for the other boy to refer to him as his given name as well.

“…Akira.” Ryuji read aloud. Akira twitched, nobody but his parents called him that and it was surprisingly intimate and infinitely embarrassing, but Ryuji didn’t seem to notice.

The other boy walked towards the door they’d come through, then threw up a hand in a lazy wave. “I’ll chat with you some other time, don’t ignore me, ‘kay?” There was no time for a response, assuming Akira could actually give one, before Ryūji was heading down the stairs and out of sight.

He was grateful for the moment alone, as well as the dull breeze that smelled like rain, for it aided his burning cheeks until they were back to normal

As far as first days go, this wasn’t too bad…

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review, I need friends. :)
Chapter Three

As with all good things, especially for Akira, they don’t last long.

Numbness dulled the nausea that the train usually induced in him, his brain was too busy trying to make sense of his life to feel queasy. Akira tried to wrap his logic around his memories, to piece them together and make sense of them, but all he felt was confusion and something else he couldn’t explain. Following Sakamoto into that castle had opened his eyes yet, for all the truth that he’d managed to uncover, he still felt blind to the bigger picture.

*If that castle wasn’t a dream...*

The implications of such were heavy and indefinite. The chances of him and Sakamoto, a complete stranger at the time, falling asleep or getting knocked out and having the *same* dream seemed infinitesimal; impossible.

His phone held evidence outside of his and Sakamoto’s memories as well.

**Return?**

The red eye was open on his screen again, and stayed that way until he was standing outside of Café Leblanc.

*Return to what?* The castle was the obvious assumption, but he couldn’t help but wonder how a smart phone application, one he’d never downloaded at that, could grant him access to a castle that didn’t exist. Akira was the first to admit he wasn’t much of a scientist or mathematician, or whatever field of study that would apply here, but he understood computers to some extent. He was certain that a series of code could not and *would* not allow two high school boys to access another version of Tokyo.

Even with that, he still couldn’t shake this feeling.

*Welcome to the real world.*

His phone had announced that once Morgana had helped them escape. Again, straightforward enough. The castle occupied a *fake* world, and he, Sakamoto, and everyone else occupied the real world. Still, how did Kamoshida occupy both? The volleyball coach even seemed to be the *ruler* of that fake world.

Kamoshida, and the other guards, seemed to be similar entities to that of Arsene and Zorro, *personas*, his brain provided, recalling Morgana’s words, yet they weren’t called upon they just *were.*
Conclusion: I’m going crazy…

Sardonically, Akira snorted to himself and closed the nameless application, not even bothering to delete it knowing that it would just reappear when he wasn’t looking. He pocketed his phone after that and finally opened the door to Leblanc before he could be arrested for loitering or something equally as sinister.

Sakura-san’s back was to the door when Akira stepped inside but the older man instantly swiveled around once he heard the door jingle. Sakura-san’s gaze was heavy on his face and Akira minded the flooring with what he hoped was nonchalance.

Before he could pretend he hadn’t noticed his new caretaker and scurry off to the attic, the deep timbre of Leblanc’s owner was chastising him, “Hey, I got an interesting call from your school today.” There was a pause, one of which, if Akira were able to speak, he’d be expected to offer an explanation or lie about what had happened.

Instead, Sakura-san cleared his throat and continued speaking, “It’s only your first day and you’re showing up hours late?” The statement really put into perspective how lowly he was thought of Sakura-san’s opinion. That he, a delinquent, was going to skip class regularly, just as long as it wasn’t the first day.

Akira was, unfortunately, reminded of Kamoshida. How the coach had belittled Sakamoto until he was stopped. Regretfully, no supernatural entities would be wrapping him in a pillar of flame so he could correct injustices; not in the real world.

He bowed, submitting to his judgement, as expected from him.

Sakura-san sighed from behind the counter, Akira couldn’t tell if he was annoyed by the gesture or just by everything.

“Look… just behave yourself.” The man stressed, “Your life is over if anything happens. You do know what probation means, right?”

Straightening his spine to its usually extent, Akira nodded.

Sakura-san sighed again, interrupting the first part of his ringtone. The café owner shooed him upstairs before he answered it. Akira was happy to oblige and all but jumped at the café’s staircase.

He took his time getting ready for bed, still caught up on the fake world. The application remained open on his screen, the red eye staring at him as he brushed his teeth. It was undeniably creepy, not even mentioning the fact that it kept reappearing and its connections to the fake world.

Morgana and Sakamoto also crossed his mind, two witnesses to the fake world. Well, he admonished, one witness and one possibly dream. Even if his new friend had seen it as well, remembered it as he did, there still wasn’t proof of the fake world.

Akira sighed, he was getting too carried away with this. It could have been as Sakamoto theorized, a prank, nothing more or less. They would both end up at Shujin Academy tomorrow and they’d either prove or disprove what they thought they saw.

Which, he realized, would mean we would be back in that castle.

He and Sakamoto had barely survived today, without Morgana they probably would have died.

Did he really want to risk his life again just to prove that he wasn’t going crazy?
Sighing, he went about his nightly routine, which now featured turning the café lights off and locking the door.

Akira was finally in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep.

In the darkness of Leblanc’s attic, he didn’t feel numb at all. A surge of emotion coursed through his entire system, making his stomach churn until he was certain he was going to vomit. Then the tears came, and the disgusting noises he made while sobbing.

He was, completely and utterly, pathetic.

“Was your decision truly a mistake then?” A voice rang out, so thunderous that he thought it’d been spoken aloud, yet his breathing, if he didn’t count how loudly his heart was beating, seemed to be the only noise in the room.

“Do you regret forging our contract?” Instantly, he knew that the voice belonged to Arsene, his persona, his other half from the fake world.

Akira considered his answer. It was true that he saved that woman from an ill fate, as well as saving Sakamoto and himself, as well as Morgana, from Kamoshida. Did he regret it? Should he have done nothing? Should he forfeit his life to those in charge?

Arsene’s presence illuminated parts of him that he’d never knew existed, granting him the gift of courage, or rebellion.

No. He didn’t—couldn’t regret it. Even if he went back in time, he would still make the same decisions. He’d save that woman, and Sakamoto, and Morgana. Akira would save himself, but he needed Arsene to do it.

I don’t regret it, he thought loudly, if that was possible.

Arsene chuckled, something deep and sinister, before continuing, “Excellent. My other half isn’t as weak as I thought!”

It should have been obvious yet, the news that he was Arsene’s other half and having it confirmed was slightly shocking. Belonging welled within him at the reply, mocking as it might have been.

Arsene’s presence in the real world, albeit only in his head, all but confirmed that either the fake world was real or that he was going crazy. He supposed, to other people at least, that it shouldn’t make him happy, that his moment of weakness and vulnerability should shatter so easily into contentedness upon hearing a voice inside of his head, but that’s what he felt.

Akira fell asleep feeling somewhat happy.

He woke up earlier than he felt he should, and without the aid of an alarm, which was definitely strange, though a lot of strange things had been happening to him recently, and he couldn’t discount waking up without an alarm as nothing.

Before he could sit up all the way, a grating voice called out to him, echoing off the walls that most certainly didn’t belong to Leblanc’s attic.

“It’s about time you came to!” The statement followed by a loud clank, undeniably metal striking metal and it made his skin crawl.

“On your feet, inmate!” The same voice called, even louder than before.
Akira did as instructed, scooting off the edge of his bed and managing to find himself on his feet only to be struck with a very heavy sense of déjà vu.

The bars in front of him, as he approached them, reminded him of the one’s found in the fake world’s castle, as well as the lighting, but the atmosphere was distinctly different, but not something he could put his finger on.

“Our master wishes to speak with you. It’s for your own sake that you take his words to heart.” A different, less grating voice called. Akira glanced down, towards the source of the voice.

*The twins!*

He recalled this place once more, the previous speech he’d gotten about impending ruin but it was mostly a blur now.

Akira’s attention was drawn to the desk in the center of the room, then towards the man behind said desk as he began speaking, “First off,” The man said, sounding pleased, though only slightly. “Let us celebrate our reunion.”

The man behind the desk froze for a moment, then brightened further, “Oh… You’ve awakened to your powers. And quite special ones at that.”

Akira wasn’t sure how to respond, he wasn’t exactly able to measure special powers from non-special ones. Instead, he nodded briefly and didn’t stare at the man’s obscenely large nose.

“Well, that’s a first.

“The term was obviously, even to Akira, not in the man’s vocabulary previous to this moment. “Allows you to travel between the real world and palaces.”
Akira was awestruck once more. He’d been handed more proof of the existence of the fake world! Unfortunately, all of said evidence occurred in dreams or from voices in his head.

“It will aid you in your rehabilitation, as well as train you to be a thief.” The figure continued, voice still lulling Akira’s half-dead brain.

**Thief?**

Suddenly, the twins turned appeared from wherever they’d been, and starting yelling at him once again.

“The Metaverse Navigator is a present from our master! You better take care in using it, inmate!”

“Devote yourself to your training so that you may become a fine thief.”

Again, he couldn’t help his confusion at the word thief. What was he supposed to be stealing in the fake world?

The man behind the desk starting speaking again, continuing as if he hadn’t been interrupted by two loud little girls.

“It must be… disheartening to make use the Metaverse Navigator alone. Should there be others who would prove beneficial to you, I will grant it to them as well.”

The man before him extended an arm towards him, inviting him forward as if Akira weren’t stuck behind a set of bars, “This is all for you to grow as an excellent thief. Now, be gone!”

His vision swam, twisting the vision before him into nothing but darkness.

Akira woke, startled into consciousness, once again, by an overwhelming sense of unease, but when he opened his eyes and sat up, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Rain could be heard from outside, though it wasn’t as heavy as it had been the day before, fortunately. Akira watched endless droplets cascade down the dusty panes of Leblanc’s attic window and, once again, tried to make sense of his existence. The dream, if that’s what it could be called, gave him a goal. Someone had high expectations for him, expectations to become a great thief. He didn’t understand why, though; nor what that had to do with the fake world or the Metaverse Navigator. More importantly, what would become of him if he failed to meet those expectations? The ruin that the previous dream mentioned?

Fortunately, it wasn’t too early for him to start getting ready and Akira was grateful for something to think about besides the fake world and all of its implications. He lost himself in the menial tasks he usually took for granted. The teen lint-rolled his uniform, tried his best to straighten the seams and even attempted to comb his hair! The last one to no avail, unfortunately, but by the time his frustration forced him to stop the café was filled with the scent of coffee and curry. Akira grabbed his school bag, trying his best to ignore the irritating weight of the whiteboard within it, as well as an umbrella; he would not be caught in the rain and lead into a creepy alley to discover another creepy castle, not today!

He waved at Sakura-san on his way out, Sakura-san grunted at him in return from behind a cigarette and reminded him to flip the sign. Akira did as he was told and cast forth his umbrella; the walk to the train station was moist, but uneventful. It didn’t stay that way, of course, the closer the train seemed to get to the epicenter of the city, the more people felt the need to almost jab his eye out with their umbrellas, then act as if it was his fault for being in the path of said umbrella.
Akira was certain at this point that he wouldn’t be able to manage a year of Tokyo public transportation; but according to the buzz of rumors spreading around the aluminum prison, that may hold some truth. Mental breakdowns, it seemed, were becoming quite common across Tokyo, causing many, many accidents, including train collisions. He shuddered to think what that might feel like. Two high-speed objects colliding head on at already neck-breaking speeds.

Shujin Academy also held its share of rumors. Much less catastrophic in scale, but no less painful to hear, however; whispers about the delinquent followed him through the halls, up the stairs, and even into the classroom. It did take him, regrettably, until he was in the doorway to his destination that Akira realized that all these rumors were about him, and not a series of delinquents!

“I heard he only talks to people he’s about to kill, that way it’s the last thing they hear.” A girl, whispered, conspicuously eyeing him as he made his way towards his assigned seat.

“…Is his voice nice though?” The recipient of the not-at-all subtle gossip asked, looking perplexed and also shooting him a look, which Akira attempted to ignore along with the burning in his cheeks. He was not often—never the core of any form of gossip, good or bad.

He didn’t hear the reply to the inquiry, the girls now speaking much more quietly, possibly due to the crowd of eager ears they were starting to draw or so that if he, Akira, were to overhear, he wouldn’t murder them.

In front of him, an almost explosive sigh turned growl was released; Akira jumped in his seat, but only a little.

To his surprise, though it really shouldn’t have been, Takamaki was sitting in front of him, glaring at the other side of the room where a group of students was eating up whatever gossip they could get their hands, or ears rather, on.

Takamaki seemed to have noticed his staring and craned her torso to face him; her face contorted immediately upon doing so, looking much friendlier but no less relaxed than when her gaze was on the crowd of gossipers.

“So, you’re friends with Ryuji, right?” Takamaki asked after another terse moment of her studying him and Akira studying the floor. The question, if nothing else, took him by surprise.

Are we friends? The other boy had offered his given name so readily, though Akira was reluctant to use it, would that not make them friends? Though, he considered, it could be a city thing. Kawakami introduced him as his family name, not even bothering with his given name, so he was reluctant to accept that as truth. Takamaki also referred to Sakamoto by his given name, it could be, he surmised, that Sakamoto just preferred his given name to his family name. Akira understood the sentiment well enough.

“Uh… hello?” Takamaki voiced, sounding agitated. “You’re not deaf too, are you?”

Akira, if he could, would have snickered. Yesterday’s run-in and subsequent manipulation of the police filled him with joy.

He pulled out his whiteboard from his bag and set it flat against his desk before beginning to write. His penmanship had not improved overnight, it seemed.

I am not deaf.

Yes, I know Sakamoto-san.
Before he consider a revision, one in which he did not use formal language in a moment of panic and thinly-veiled deceit. What did it actually matter if Takamaki knew he was pals with Sakamoto? The blonde took the liberty of erasing the board for him.

“So…” Takamaki began, only to be interrupted with a teacher, one Akira hadn’t met considering his first day at school was one period long. The girl in front of him growled something under his breath, then turned back in her seat, facing forward. Akira was left confused with the whole interaction, which was becoming quite frequent in the two days he’s been in the city.

At the front of the room, the teacher sneered at all of them, holding the expression long enough for Akira to wonder if that was just his natural facial expression.

“I’m Ushimaru-sensei, the social studies teacher; it’s my misfortune to teach you kids the rules of society this year.”

Out of all the rude teachers he’d had, and he’d had a lot considering he was unable to verbally participate in class, something teachers loved to torture people with, Ushimaru-sensei had to be the rudest, blatantly so.

Ushimaru-sensei’s sneer turned into a scowl, “You all look like spoiled children.” There was an outbreak of shocked gasps across the classroom, clearly a rude teacher was uncommon in Shujin.

“Before we learn the rules of society, maybe I should teach you all the rules for being a decent human being— Hey, transfer student!” Akira’s heart froze.

Was I breathing too loudly? He wondered, attempting to calculate why he’d been singled out all of a sudden as he took to his feet.

“The Greek philosopher, Plato, divided the human soul into three parts. What are they?”

It was only through the grace of god that Akira actually knew the answer, of that he was certain. Keeping his face as inoffensive as possible, he grabbed the whiteboard from his desk and began to write his answer, only to be interrupted by the individual who’d asked the question.

“I asked you a question!” Ushimaru-sensei snapped. Murmurs broke across the class room only to be silenced in the next instant with a loud, “Quiet!” from the instructor.

“…Huh?” The instructed stated brilliantly as Akira flipped the instrument around, revealing his answer, which was, to his memory, correct. There was more murmuring, this time, however, it was the instructor before them doing so as he read Akira’s answer.

“Hm.” Ushimaru-sensei grunted after a moment, “You’re the kid who doesn’t talk, then?” Akira nodded dutifully. “At least you’re not stupid, also.” The man laughed, and continued doing so for a long moment in which Akira took his seat and wiped off his board with his sleeve; thankfully, both the sleeve and the ink in the marker were black.

Ushimaru-sensei continued to send demanding questions around the room for the remainder of the period, fortunately none of these questions were sent towards him. Be it bias or just forgetting that he existed, Akira knew not, nor did he care too much for the answer.

The rest of his second, though Akira wondered if he should count it as his first, day at school continued in much of the same manner. None of the other instructors were as rude as Ushimaru-sensei, which he supposed was a blessing.

Exiting the classroom left him frozen though, not even two meters in front of him was the ruler of
the fake world, though his skin was considerably more human, his presence was no less intimidating or unsettling.

Kamoshida towered over Takamaki, who has by no means a short girl, even in Japanese standards. The blonde could, without a doubt, smell the breath of the teacher as he all but whispered into her ear. The action looked incredibly... intimate for a school hallway. The man laughed at something he had said and Akira watched his giant shoulders shake in doing so; Kamoshida held an intimidating physique that his fake world counterpart seemed to lack.

It was then that Takamaki noticed him staring at them.

“Oh! Uh... Kakaru-kun!” Akira blinked.

Kakaru?

Takamaki, with surprising grace, escaped the hold that Kamoshida had on her shoulders and sidled over to him. “I did not mean to keep you waiting!” She said, loudly, right into his face, while winking, with both eyes, repeatedly. Over her shoulder, Kamoshida crossed his arms, looking very, very annoyed.

“Let us get going, then! I completely forgot that we had made those plans to do... that! Together! You and I, Kakaru-kun.” Akira was at a loss; he had, sort of, an inkling of what was occurring, yet could not suppress the wince that occurred during Takamaki’s overzealous acting.

The blonde latched onto his arm and before he, or his legs, could realize it, Takamaki was dragging him down the stairs and towards the entrance. Kamoshida’s presence, or odor, he wasn’t sure which, followed them to the school gates.

His arm, which had lost circulating during their decent, was finally released and Akira massaged it lightly as Takamaki continued to lead him away from the Shujin campus, though, he supposed at this point, he was just following her.

In unison, they leaned against a stone wall that was far enough away that Kamoshida wouldn’t follow them, either at the risk of looking creepy or that he had other things to do.

“Thank you, by the way.” Takamaki said before promptly bursting into tears.

Akira, despite often being compared to one at his old school, did not have a lot of experience with females or their temperaments. He ended up staring at the blonde as she continued to cry, which was neither helpful nor unhelpful, but at least he wasn’t doing anything wrong! To his relief, the tears eventually subsided.

“Sorry... I just—“ Just as suddenly as Takamaki had begun crying, she began laughing! It was odd, hearing such a light-hearted sound coming from someone who had wet tears still on their face, yet Akira found it quite charming. Odd, obviously, but charming. The blonde’s laugh, much like her crying fit, did not last long. After a moment of gathering her composure, she turned to him, only to begin laughing again. It was the same sound, yet he couldn’t help but feel she was laughing at him at this point. His cheeks flushed in frustration; this near complete stranger drags him into an alley just to laugh at him! “Your face! Oh my god!” Takamaki cackled and snorted and Akira had had enough. Spinning on his heel, he began to stride away, trying to stop cursing the girl in his head because people like her weren’t worth the effort.

Before he could make his escape however, Takamaki latched onto his arm once again. While the girl was by no means short, he was certain enough that he was stronger! With that, he gave a
mighty tug to his ensnared arm only to find that it wouldn’t budge from her grip. Sighing, he gave
it another tug, attempting to utilize the strength of all his muscles, yet the result remained the same.
Takamaki was still firmly attached to his bicep.

“Seriously,” Takamaki began, sounding sober now, “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. Just your face
looked so scared! Like you’ve never seen a girl cry before.” Spitefully, Akira tried to recall all the
times he had seen a girl cry before, only to come up blank. He shrugged in response, feeling
incredibly embarrassed still. “Still, I shouldn’t be laughing at you, you did save me from
Kamoshida just then.” Again, Akira shrugged.

“At least let me say thank you!” She whined, tugging on his arm until he was forced to turn around,
something he was also currently embarrassed about. With not much of a choice, he abided, and
waited for his thanks.

Takamaki stared at him, looking like she was also waiting.

“Well?” The girl said after a long moment.


“Teach me!” His guard was up instantly after that. For all he knew, Takamaki could be a spy from
Principal Kobayakowa to ensure he didn’t sign. That eventuality seemed unlikely, but so did a fake
world existing and a smart phone being the only way to access it.

“Come on…” Takamaki whined, stamping her feet like an aggressive toddler. Akira sighed
wearily. If he didn’t do as requested, he doubted that his arm would be returned to him, or he’d lose
the favor of the only person in his class that wasn’t gossiping about him; that he knew about
anyway. Takamaki’s irritation with their classmates seemed genuine, but she could be an equally as
fervent gossiper and hid it so she could pull a stunt like this.

He was over thinking this.

Probably.

Just as Takamaki opened her mouth to plead or yell at him, Akira went lax in her grip and nodded
reluctantly. The blonde cheered, but couldn’t decipher a reason why.

His arm was released, and he was now standing face to face with Takamaki.

“That’s thank you?” Akira nodded in response, keeping his face blank, save for his still aching cheeks; he was still wary of the girl in front of him,
even if she seemed kind enough.

“Come on…” Takamaki whined, stamping her feet like an aggressive toddler. Akira sighed
wearily. If he didn’t do as requested, he doubted that his arm would be returned to him, or he’d lose
the favor of the only person in his class that wasn’t gossiping about him; that he knew about
anyway. Takamaki’s irritation with their classmates seemed genuine, but she could be an equally as
fervent gossiper and hid it so she could pull a stunt like this.

He was over thinking this.

Probably.

Just as Takamaki opened her mouth to plead or yell at him, Akira went lax in her grip and nodded
reluctantly. The blonde cheered, but couldn’t decipher a reason why.

His arm was released, and he was now standing face to face with Takamaki.

“Thank you.” He signed, chopping the back of one hand with the other and bowing slightly.
Nothing to get excited about, though he supposed learning something exotic would be neat, even to
city people.

Takamaki mimicked the sign decent enough. “That’s thank you?” Akira nodded in response,
keeping his face blank, save for his still aching cheeks; he was still wary of the girl in front of him,
even if she seemed kind enough.

“Yeah, thank you, Kakaru-kun, for earlier, I mean, and for teaching me” Takamaki signed what she
knew, all of two words, and Akira signed his thanks in return, and waved his farewell before
finally exiting the alley she’d dragged him into. They walked in opposite directions, Takamaki
walking further away from the school, as well as the station, and he, Akira towards them. A
familiar face was lingering outside of the gates, leaning against one of the stone pillars that made
up the gate to the school.

“Yo.” Sakamoto greeted, taking one of his hands outside of his pockets to wave at him. Akira
waved in return and hastened his approach until he too was leaning against the gates to Shujin Academy.

“Saw you hangin’ with Takamaki, you know her?” Akira shrugged in response, wondering if he should bother trying to write out an explanation of what the girl had wanted from him; he decided against it, it would probably only confuse Sakamoto more than it confused him.

Satisfied enough, at least in Akira’s perspective, the blond beside him nodded, “Anyway, I wanna talk about that castle from yesterday.” The tone shifted in both the air and Sakamoto’s voice once it was brought up out loud. Akira glanced around, wondering if it was safe to discuss the fake world when there were still people around, people very interested in creating rumors about his voice. Sakamoto’s voice lowered into a husky whisper, obviously noticing the rush of people attempting to escape the school grounds, “I kept trying to tell myself it was just a dream, ya know?” Akira nodded, he wished it was a dream, but even his actual dreams confirmed its existence. That weird man told him to become a thief, and that somehow had correlated into the fake world, as well as his persona.

Still.

*I think I need to go back.*

“I can’t act like nothin happened. It’s all connected to that bastard, Kamoshida, after all.” Sakamoto added, disgruntled at the mention of Kamoshida, though he was the one to do so. The blond leaned in closer, and Akira could smell the food on his breath, “I wanna find out what’s up with that place, no matter what. And you’re the only person I can rely on for this. So, you in?”

Akira was in, without a doubt. He was just unsure if Sakamoto should come, they’d nearly died the last time, without Arsene and Morgana, they definitely would have died; though, now that he thought about it, Sakamoto being in danger had spurred his *awakening*, and the blond’s quick thinking helped them just as much, if not more, than Akira himself did.

He nodded, praying for a moment that he wouldn’t live to regret it.

*Or not live to… not regret it.*

“It was easier convincing you than myself,” Sakamoto chuckled, leaning back, “We should retrace our steps to find that castle again, right?” That, with the Metaverse Navigator, would most likely land them in front of the castle once again. Akira pulled out his phone and clicked on the foreboding eyeball that would, according to his dream, help them into the fake world and help him become a thief.

**Return?**

The question was simple enough, but he waited until they had returned to where they first met, where he’d given Ryuji the, ever charming, nickname of Blob-2. Together they made it to the alley where they had first entered the fake world. Finally, Akira gave his answer.

His head, just like it had yesterday, seemed to split open, it seemed entering the fake world caused that kind of reaction, explaining yesterday’s headache as well. When Akira opened his eyes, he couldn’t help but notice that his vision was partially blocked. His fingers, now gloved, ghosted over a mask that seemed to cover the entire upper half of his face, nose included. His entire attire had changed in the time it took him to blink, another byproduct of the fake world, which lead him to the conclusion that his dream was truthful.
“Huh—Woah! Those clothes.” Sakamoto was now gaping at him, though, to be fair, Akira would probably have a similar reaction if it were Sakamoto to suddenly be clad in leather instead of… whatever it was that made their uniforms so uncomfortable. “That happened last time too.” The blond tacked on, confused as Akira as to why his clothes changed when he entered the fake world.

“And the castle is here! It is real.” Sakamoto noticed, gazing up at the impossible structure. Akira stared at the blackened sky, thoroughly uncomfortable, there was neither sun nor moon, no indication that time was passing in the fake world, yet time did seem to pass. He was pulled from staring at the oddity that was the ceiling of this world when Sakamoto made another noise from beside him.

“Woah—“ Only to be shushed by an unmistakable voice.

Akira glanced towards the ground and was met with the sight of Morgana, along with his giant eyes.

“What are you two doing here?” The cat screeched, despite only having told Sakamoto to quiet down but a moment ago. “You barely escaped the last time you came here, why’d you bother coming back?” It questioned, clearly annoyed.

Sakamoto turned to him, as if expecting him to answer the upset cat… thing. Akira shrugged in response, not really having much of an explanation, or one that sounded reasonable anyway.

“What is this place? The school?” Sakamoto asked instead of answering, kicking at some rubble on the ground.

“That’s right.” Morgana replied, crossing its appendages over its chest.

“Yes it’s a castle!” Sakamoto snapped in return, frustration turning his voice into a shout.

He does have a point. The school in the fake world lingered in the area the school was in the real world.

“The castle is the school, but only to the castle’s ruler.” Morgana replied, now also shouting. The school turned into the castle because of the ruler? The logistics weren’t, in Akira’s opinion, logical in the slightest.

“The castle’s ruler?” Ryuji asked, leaning down until his backside rested on his ankles as if he suddenly decided to be sneaky.

Morgana nodded his enormous head, “I think you called him Kamoshida?” Akira watched as Sakamoto’s entire body tensed up all the way to his fists, which had turned a pearly color.

“That bastard rules this place?” The blond asked, sending a fiery glare towards Morgana, who nodded in kind. “It’s how he views the school, how his heart does, anyway.” Akira nodded, not really making sense of it. Somehow, according to the cat-thing, Kamoshida was able to make a fake world because he viewed himself as a king.

Armor of the heart… His persona was made that way, could an entire world be made from the heart also? Unreal couldn’t even begin to describe the situation.

Akira was pulled out his thoughts by screaming. Loud, piercing cries for help. He shuddered; clearly the king had to punish those who defied him, he wondered if he’d be one of them.
“Wh-what was that?” Sakamoto stammered, staring at the castle walls with immense unease.

“Must be the slaves held captive here…” Morgana answered, looking as uncomfortable as Ryuji at the sound. “…But they’re only here because Kamoshida views them that way!” The cat-thing was quick to say, tacking it on for its own benefit, though the statement did nothing to calm any of them down.

“R-right… So they’re like… imaginary?” Morgana nodded fervently, its bulbous neck vibrating in the process.

“If we stop Kamoshida, they’d be freed then?” Sakamoto asked once the screams quieted down to the point where they could hear each other.

Morgana tapped what was presumably its chin with its furry appendage, “That would make sense, if the ruler of the castle dies, then the entire palace would disappear.”

“Woah woah woah--!” Sakamoto interrupted, “I didn’t say anythin’ about killing him, I just meant… beat him up or somethin’.”

Morgana looked up at Ryuji, clearly unimpressed, “We won’t be killing him in the real world, but if we can defeat him in his palace, then the slaves would be free… because this place no longer exists.”

“What do you mean, ‘no longer exists’?” Sakamoto demanded, repeating Morgana’s words in a shrill imitation.

The cat-thing sighed, “Why bother explaining it to a moron?”

Sakamoto growled, looking like he might strangle their companion.

Akira stepped forward, then, before anything bad could happen. He doubted that Morgana knew JSL, considering the thing didn’t have fingers, so he attempted his best pleading look. Morgana’s mouth twitched, and a sigh was released from it.

“At least someone has some sense, even if you don’t talk much…” It stated before grinning, “Cat got your tongue?” Morgana jested, giving off a hearty laugh. He, very briefly, considered throwing Morgana into the moat that surrounded the castle.

“He don’t talk.” Sakamoto said in his place, looking annoyed.

Morgana’s face expressed confusion, but he continued explaining, “Er, Like I said, the school is the castle because the ruler’s heart, in this case, this Kamoshida guy, views it that way. His cognition of your school caused this palace to form, and that’s what causes those slaves to scream. If we can defeat the ruler of this castle, he may have a change of heart.”

Akira listened to Morgana’s explanation with his full attention, though half of it made little sense.

Surely more than Kamoshida thinks they’re a ruler of something… Which would mean…

He tugged out his phone, while the fake world did not have internet or service, it didn’t hinder the use of the keyboard.

Is there more than this castle then? Are there others?

Akira pushed the screen into Morgana’s face and held it there, not sure if the cat could hold a
phone, though the lack of fingers didn’t stop him from wielding a sword, for some reason. Cognition, most likely.

Morgana’s mouth trembled and formed a grin, “You’re pretty sharp! To answer your question, yes; anyone with distorted desires can form a palace.” Satisfied enough, Akira deleted the text and turned to Sakamato. The blond looked distinctly uncomfortable and was chewing on his nail in thought.

“We just gotta stop him in this world then?” Morgana nodded.

“Let’s go then!”

“You’re coming too, right, frizzy hair?” Akira frowned at the title, but found himself nodding.

“Then follow me!” The cat-thing ordered, before walking away from the entrance.

“The door’s… right there.” Sakamato commented, looking annoyed that the cat was leading them.

Morgana scoffed, “Amateurs, the first rule of phantom thievery is to never barge in the front door… you’ll only attract attention to us.”

_phantom… thievery…_ His mind echoed, recalling his peculiar dream.

“…How ‘m I supposed to know that?” Sakamato snarked back, folding himself into the shaft that Morgana was able to walk through. Once Akira was in the same position, he couldn’t help but feel a little envious of the cat-thing.

Morgana chortled quietly, “I’ll just have to teach you two the proper way to be phantom thieves!” It proclaimed boldly, further reassuring to Akira that this was where he needed to be to fulfill the objective his dream had set up for rehabilitation. He felt a little more confident following the cat around now.

Their impromptu tour guide helped them sneak through the winding corridors of Kamoshida’s castle until they landed in front of the cell where they’d locked Kamoshida up the last time they’d been here.

“Damnit…” Sakamato cursed, slamming his fists against the cell’s bars, “Where is that bastard?”

“It is his castle, Ryuji, the guards would have noticed eventually that their leader was missing…” Morgana replied, its bulbous eyes glancing around the expansive dungeon. Suddenly, the cat jumped, “S-speaking of which!” A furry appendage flew up, pointing towards the other side of the room where several guards were gathering, walking uniformly across the drawbridge, their only means of escape.

“Shit!” Ryuji whispered loudly, though the sound, thankfully, was dulled by the hissing of the river that divided the room. “That’s a lot of ‘em… and I’m just deadweight right now.” Akira would have liked to say some encouraging words, something to dispute Sakamoto’s claim; the blond had been just as useful in their escape as Morgana, more than Akira himself too.

They were losing time very quickly, obviously one or all of them had been spotted coming down here, resulting in the miniature army that was closing in on them. Still, they didn’t have time to form a plan, Akira not able to give orders while Morgana and Ryuji were rooted in fear and aggravation respectively.

_I have to do something._
Arsene’s power was great, immense and supernatural, but he doubted that the being could destroy the forces before them. Sneaking was hardly a viable option, the forces had either seen or heard them, and there weren’t many places to hide. Instead…

*Got it!*

He’d been considering sneaking or hiding, but never both together! Akira stepped to the side, tugging on Sakamoto’s arm and signaled him to be quiet by covering his mouth with his gloved hand. The blond stared at the glove, then at his masked face. Clear as day, Akira could see the fear and the worry in the teen’s eyes; he smiled in return, albeit the smile felt incredibly fake, even as he forced as much cockiness as he could into it.

The legion of steel-garbed guards were closing in on them. They were close enough that Akira could start making out the details on their masks.

He closed his eyes, attempting to focus. Both Sakamoto and Morgana made noises of worry and protest, trying to proclaim orders over the other.

Akira snapped.

Arsene’s wings conjured a draft as the being, his persona, appeared. The Pillager of Twilight drifted forward, across the room in an instant, concealed by shadow. Their connected minds relayed instructions to each other; well, Akira relayed instructions, Arsene just chuckled and abided them.

The chandelier was a massive structure, rings upon rings of thick iron with candles that cast the room in an ominous, orange glow. Fortunately, for the three of them at least, it was connected to the ceiling with rope and nothing else. The rope was easily singed into nothingness by Arsene’s power, the shadowy being cackled loudly, drawing the attention of the guards and pausing their insidious march. Within a second of the rope being severed, the construct had slammed into the castle’s floor, punching through the stone floor as a measure of how heavy it truly was. Dark dust scattered across the dungeon like a cloud as debris splattered from the floor into the air in heavy chunks.

Akira ran, tugging Ryuji into the same motion. In long strides, they managed to slip past the distracted and coughing guards. He kept running, even when the scenery changed from dungeon to elaborate wallpaper and disturbing paintings of Kamoshida. Akira ignored all of these things, brain functioning on adrenaline alone, ignoring even Arsene’s voice in his mind, only serving to vibrate his eardrums as he slammed the door closed on what he assumed was a broom closet.

Once it was clear that no guards would be swarming them in this poorly lit room, Akira allowed himself to fall to the floor gracelessly, completely exhausted.

“Dude…” Ryuji uttered, panting but still managing to stay standing, how the blond managed to do so was beyond him, yet he had little time to consider the manner before Morgana starting speaking.

“That was amazing!” The cat-thing exclaimed, letting them know that it too had managed to escape the distracted guards, though it did sound like a toddler instead of…

*Maybe Morgana is a toddler in cat years or something.* The feline-like thing didn’t look too old, but that could just be its giant head making Akira think that way.

“You’ll make a fine phantom thief yet!” Morgana continued, making Akira’s heart freeze. It was the second time Morgana had mentioned thievery, in one way or another; would that mean that his
strange dreams and Morgana were somehow related? “And your control over your persona was… Amazing!”

Sakamoto snorted from behind Morgana before adding his own comment, “Yeah, dude. You totally saved our butts, but how’d you come up with that so fast? I mean, Monamona and I were frozen but you were all like—” Ryuji waved his arm around, looking like he was doing a dance rather than summoning a persona to save their lives.

Akira shrugged; he had no idea if the plan would actually work or not, definitely a hefty risk, but one that had paid off quite well.

The three of them lingered inside of the quiet broom closet, Akira was pretty sure he had an idea of what the other two were thinking about, the same thing he too was pondering.

_How are we going to get to Kamoshida when we’re this weak…_ 

Their personas weren’t _weak_ per se, _but_ with the number of guards that were patrolling Kamoshida’s castle, they’d run out of stamina before they could even begin searching.

“Still, I—we won’t be able to depend on your quick thinking if we want to take down this castle’s ruler, and the guards will only get stronger the closer we get to Kamoshida.” Morgana proclaimed, taking perch on a wooden stool in the corner of the room. “And to do that, we need to battle some of the guards, not as many as back there, but a few of them so you can get used to fighting; and we might learn something about their weaknesses if we do.” Morgana’s explanation made sense, at it fit in with what his dream had said about training the power of his persona.

“Well, if you two are going to fight… those _things_, then I guess I should give you this, since I can’t really help.” Sakamoto said, casually pulling a _gun_ from his pocket, as if that were a normal thing to do. “It’s fake though, so it only makes sounds.” He let out a sigh of relief but didn’t take the offered item.

_It could prove useful, like a smaller instance of that chandelier falling._

“It could be useful!” Morgana chirped, mimicking his thoughts, “I mean, not as it is in the real world, but we’re not in the real world!”

Sakamoto shot the cat-thing a deadpan look, obviously confused, much like Akira himself.

“It’s like your outfit.” Was the explanation, which was met by more silence from both him and Sakamoto. “Er… Well, this castle is created due to Kamoshida’s distorted desires, right?” Two nods, Morgana continued, “Your outfit is the same way, it’s how you resist the distortions of this place, it’s a manifestation of your rebellion, of your heart.”

Never in Akira’s life had he, or his heart for that matter, wanted to wear leather, even if the ensemble was pretty—_really_ cool. Still, he took Morgana’s explanation for truth.

“Does that mean your heart makes you a cat?” Sakamoto asked after the explanation.

Morgana growled, “I am _not_ a cat!” It spouted from its weird cat mouth, “I… I lost my _true_ form, and I’m trying to get it back, or I was until Kamoshida captured and tortured me!” He felt bad for Morgana, of being suspicious of it, it was a victim, just like the Sakamoto and himself.

“Sorry,” Morgana offered, though he had nothing to apologize for, Akira would have lost his temper too if he’d been tortured, maybe not at being accused for a cat though, “Anyways… If your cognition believes it’s a gun, it’ll act and fire like one too.” He couldn’t help but wonder what else
the fake world had to offer, he imagined it was only as limited to their cognition…

For Kamoshida’s entire cognition to become this castle…

“We should get going now, I think the guards have lowered their suspicions.” Akira nodded in agreement, though he didn’t feel fully prepared to go looking for trouble, doubted that he would ever be, really.

Morgana decided to lead the way, easing them along the confusing hallways until it stopped beside a corner, it beckoned them closer with a wave of its paw until they were all face to face, “If you can sneak up behind that guard,” Morgana peered around the corner, gesturing at a still suit of armor that was facing away from them, “Rip its mask off, it’ll lower Kamoshida’s control over it—effectively weakening it.” Akira nodded before letting out a deep breath.

Then he pounced.

The armor toppled, then disappeared into nothing, leaving two disgruntled enemies in front of him, which turned into them as Morgana leapt beside him.

Akira pulled out Sakamoto’s gun, it was light, as plastic often is, and felt strange to hold, the same way Arsene’s knife felt. Dangerous. He ignored the shaking that his arm was producing and aimed the toy towards the closer of the two things.

Just believe it’s real…

He fired.

The thing, which had been a miniature person with wings, exploded beneath the impact of the bullet, sending it flying several meters before turning into ashes.

“Holy shit!” Sakamoto whispered from around the corner.

Feeling more confident, he swiveled the gun to the other beast. It was shaking as much as his arm was.

“P-p-please don’t kill me!” The floating pumpkin stammered, startling all of them and causing Ryuji to let out another, “Holy shit!”

“Ignore it and fire!” Morgana commanded, winding up his sword to slice the poor thing in half.

“W-w-w-wait!” It cried, mysterious liquid seeping out of all the holes that made up its face. Akira cringed. “I c-can give you my p-power!” It reasoned, extending its appendage towards him.

The thing faded into nothingness as Morgana swept its blade over where the beast had just existed.

“What the…” Sakamoto whispered, watching in awe as the monster flew into Akira’s mask, causing the teen to jerk.

“Teehee, I’m a part of you now!” A voice called, but not out loud… from inside of him.

Arsene sighed wearily, also inside of his head. “It seems you’ve acquired another persona.” The Pillager noticed, sounding bitter, though Akira couldn’t decipher why.

“Dude!” Sakamoto yelled, somehow managing to get in front of him without Akira noticing. “You absorbed that thing!”
“Did you really manage to absorb its power?” Morgana asked, staring at him in the same way Sakamoto currently was.

“Go ahead, master! Try out my abilities!” Akira closed his eyes, drawing focus, then snapped at an unsavory painting of Kamoshida. The canvas caught aflame, like Akira knew it would, yet these flames didn’t hold the same darkness that Arsene’s did, they looked for all purposes like normal fire. Morgana also seemed to notice the difference.

“Amazing! So you have the power to hold more than one persona?” The cat asked, staring at the orange flame as it quickly consumed the entire portrait. “This could be useful…” Morgana muttered, “Let’s continue then.” The cat said, sounding more confident than before.

Together, they walked through the landscape of Kamoshida’s desires, wandering through various rooms that somehow lowered Akira’s already abysmal opinion of the man; Sakamoto held the same reaction, though more amplified, justifiably so because he actually knew the victims; all the students he’s abused, verbally and physically, and all of the girls… Akira didn’t want to think about those.

Takamaki was a prominent theme in Kamoshida’s castle, alters and paintings to his classmate were scattered across the castle almost as frequently as Kamoshida himself was. She was even listed as his queen, though that title, according to a rather thick tome that Ryuji had discovered, was held by many, many students. Sakamoto’s name came up also, fortunately in a different book, entitled Slaves, though this one, according to the blond, was just a list of names of all of Shujin’s athletes, former and current. Of course, queens and slaves were nothing without their… King. All of Kamoshida’s misdoings were written with gratuitous amounts of exaggeration and hyperbole, and was, quite frankly, disturbing. Akira was horrified to think anyone, even Kamoshida, could view manipulating students as a good thing, something to be praised about, even. He felt like vomiting over the leather cover.

Unfortunately, the three artifacts, all accounts of Kamoshida’s abuse and scummy activities, were required to reveal a hidden room inside of Kamoshida’s library. He just prayed there was nothing even worse inside of a room meant to keep others out.

The three of them entered the chamber hidden behind the library walls, Akira was certain he wasn’t the only one feeling the need to bathe. The room itself was quite small, but what it lacked in space made up for in disturbing images, actual images. Some girl with dark hair and a lot of bruises covering her slender body. He’d been expecting Takamaki, if anything, but clearly Kamoshida wanted to keep this girl a secret.

“Suzui…” Sakamoto rasped out, trudging up to the wall of pictures and examining each of them. “That bastard!” The blond screeched, sending his fist into the frame that had been taken inside of a locker room. Akira shuddered, the nausea from before returning in full force.

He had skipped lunch, so the meager contents of his stomach came up swiftly. His throat burned, along with his eyes. The fluids splattered noisily on the ground, staining the marble floors of the castle.

Akira stepped out of the chamber and took a seat in the library, keeping his back to the disturbing images that lingered behind him.

Minutes later, Sakamoto and Morgana exited the chamber as well, Akira listened for the sliding wall to close before he could urge himself to turn around.

Sakamoto was looking at the ground, looking pent up. His bleeding fist did not go unnoticed.
Morgana looked up at him sadly, “W-we found these, so we should be able to find out where Kamoshida is hiding.” The cat said, lifting up a map as well as a gold medal. Akira looked at the disc, Morgana tinkered with it carefully, “It seemed important, nobody locks something away if it’s not important.” Akira shrugged, feeling dirty and numb, but also infuriated and disgusted.

“I think you two should leave… for today at least.” Morgana said, storing the items in a pouch Akira hadn’t noticed it had.

“But we haven’t caught up to Kamoshida!” Sakamoto shouted, making him flinch, “That bastard needs to pay!”

“I understand that!” Morgana replied, now also shouting, “But look at him! He’s too shook up to continue, and… I can’t do this alone.”

Akira flushed from the neck up, mortified that he, despite his strength, despite having these abilities, was the one slowing them down.

Sakamoto looked at him, anger and frustration swiftly morphed into pity, Akira couldn’t stand it. The blond sighed, “Y-yeah… I guess you’re right.” Akira wanted to dispute, to continue their journey but… the fight had left him after seeing that, seeing how much of a complete monster Kamoshida was.

“I’ll take you two back to the entrance, and you can come back tomorrow, got it?” Sakamoto mumbled something in response that Akira didn’t bother listening to. He just nodded in Morgana’s direction and began following the cat when it set off.

He’d consider the facts, as much as he could through his confusion, and the signs had all been there, but to actually see the evidence, actual evidence, of something so vile. He wanted to throw up again.

Before he even realized it, his feet had carried him to the entrance hall, Morgana silently leading the two of them towards the exit. Only for the exit, as well as the entire room, to be swarmed in a symphony of armor as they approached.

“Sakamoto… and you!” A voice snapped. Akira twisted his head and spotted Kamoshida through his entourage of guards, the teacher was glaring down at them with flaxen eyes, a smug sneer stretching his lips. “To think you’d come back, how far the star of the track team has fallen.” The king taunted, a menacing chuckle followed the jape.

Track team? It did explain what Sakamoto’s name was doing in that book…

“Oh,” The man, if Akira could even call him that, smirked, “I can only imagine the pain of the others who were dragged under because of your selfish acts…”

He could hear Ryuji’s teeth grinding together, he just hoped the other boy wouldn’t act rashly and get them all sent to execution, but he had a feeling that that would happen regardless of what the blond said.

“And what of your mother? Is she still disappointed at the scum her son has become?” With that, one of the guards shoved the blond to the ground, Akira was quick to receive the same treatment. Morgana, however, seemed to had gone unnoticed and was quick to summon Zorro to dispatch the guards that were starting to crush them, only for the circle of armor to grow tighter, more and more
of the beasts surrounding them, all braying their praise to the *glorious* Kamoshida.

Akira, along with Morgana, attempted to protect themselves and Ryuji, but as each suit of armor fell, another replaced it, more frantic than the last until finally…

“Kill them!” Kamoshida shouted, annoyed with their attempt at a fight.

“…I can’t… move!” Morgana shouted from beneath the foot of a looming soldier. Akira was much in the same position, mind too frazzled to summon a persona and his entire body being constricted by supernatural strength.

Akira gazed between the faces of his companions, Ryuji was glaring at Kamoshida silently, but caught his managed to catch his gaze once there was a sword propping his chin up.

“D-dude!” The blond shouted from the wrong end of a sword.

*I’m sorry*… Akira mouthed, transfixed in the helplessness in Ryuji’s expression.

“Ryuji!” Morgana shouted from the ground, a sword centimeters from puncturing his frail neck. “You can fight this!” The cat shouted, loud enough that it echoed around the entrance hall despite being half squished by one of Kamoshida’s guards.

Ryuji glanced over at him once more once there was a sword under his neck as well.

Akira knew this was the end, there was no hope left, and he wasn’t strong enough to… do *anything*. Tears, for the second time in two days, leaked down his face, despite how numb everything felt, he was still saddened by the prospect of his imminent demise.

“NO!”

Then it all turned blue.

Flames whipped around the entire room, the roaring hiss only amplified by the screaming that was coming from the epicenter of the chaos.

In front of him…

Ryuji was awakening his persona.

---

Chapter End Notes
REALLY sorry about the late updates. I've been busy being depressed and wanting to die. Please leave a review, let me know if you like or dislike something about the story, I can try to change it. :)

I'm trying to keep the palace excursions shorter in the future, mostly because this story would be pretty bland if Akira played persona like I did. *16 hours in mementos later...* type stuff. Anyway, thank you for reading my story. I'll try to update more often.
Chapter Four

All forms of speech crumbled into nothing once Ryuji erupted in flames, Kamoshida’s taunting twisted into silent shock, his massive jaw appearing unhinged due to his gaping mouth, the guards too fell silent, transforming into gleaming metal statues, each of them taking in and reflecting the hue of Ryuji’s inferno. It was, to say the least, the most stunning sight Akira had laid eyes on, that is until his eyes were forced shut by something even brighter than the flames conjured by Ryuji’s awakening; lightning, actual lighting was gathering around the blond and dissecting into the crowd of metal, somehow missing Morgana and himself and appeared to have no effect on Ryuji at all. In tandem, the pillar of Ryuji’s flame and the lighting he had somehow conjured spread out, increasing its radius and dulling its intensity. Akira could feel his skin starting to singe from the heat and the crackling of the screaming room, yet, he couldn’t take his eyes off of his friend as Ryuji tore his mask away, causing a film of blood to begin shooting down the sharp angles of his nose and cheeks. Again, the storm changed, surging through all of them, Akira included, as Ryuji screamed a final time, his persona beginning to take on its form meters above the blond’s head. Akira’s head flicked back and forth as he watched each and every guard in the room disintegrate to nothing more than dust, some of them even starting to scream in fear, but none of them moved their legs, just grimly accepted their punishment as Ryuji dealt it.

“Kamoshida!” Ryuji screamed, voice heavy in conviction and pain as he jabbed his now gloved hand towards the castle’s ruler, a stark yellow that contrasted Akira’s crimson.

“How dare you raise your hand to me!” The king shouted in return, raising a hand once more as if to command the guards that no longer existed. Shock registered briefly on Kamoshida’s face before he turned back to Ryuji, a horrendous grin taking place on his face, “I’ve already broken your leg once before, Sakamoto, what makes you think I can’t do it again?”

Below the steely cover of his mask, Ryuji’s face twisted into a grin of his own, “Because I ain’t the same kid I was back then, you bastard!” With that, Ryuji waved his arm forward, causing his persona to shift forward and Akira got a good look at the skeletal pirate right before it shot a cannonball at Kamoshida. “I’m going to expose what you are, no matter what!” A shot from his persona punctuating every word.

Kamoshida dove gracelessly out of the way of Ryuji’s fire, somehow managing to dodge everything that Ryuji fired at him, running towards the staircase that lead deeper into the castle, “This isn’t over, you petulant thieves, the next time you show your faces I won’t be so merciful!” The twisted man shouted, whisking away without another word. Ryuji stepped forward, obviously intent to follow Kamoshida into a trap, only to start limply falling forward. Akira was quick to interrupt though, preventing the blond from face-planting onto the marble flooring, where the remains of Kamoshida’s guards were still settling to the ground.

“We have to… c-chase after him!” Ryuji pleaded, voice as pliant as his body was. Akira just wished his friend wasn’t so heavy.

Morgana stepped up to them then, “You’re too weak right now, Ryuji, we should leave before any more guards show up.”
Ryuji mumbled something in defiance, but didn’t put up much of a fight as Akira hooked the blond’s arm over his shoulder and began to drag him towards the other end of the entrance hall where the ventilation shaft that they’d entered from was located. Fortunately, by the time they’d actually reached the shaft, Sakamoto seemed to have recovered some of his strength, so Akira didn’t have to somehow hoist the boy off the ground, something he was immensely thankful for.

Once they were outside of the castle, Morgana stepped in front of them, a strange look blatantly obvious in its overly sized eyeballs, “To think you had the potential too, Ryuji.” The cat said, sounding pleased. Akira’s own thoughts were on the same subject, though, he supposed it was bound to happen. Sakamoto’s will of rebellion, as Morgana had called it, was the most obvious thing about him.

“Is this a skull?” Sakamoto asked, pawing at his mask with his gloved hands. For the first time, Akira could look at his friend without being blinded by fire, lighting, or adrenaline. Sakamoto’s outfit consisted of leather and pieces of metal, the only thing preventing the blond from being a black and silver blob was the yellow gloves and the red scarf dangling from his neck, identical to the one that his persona had been wearing. His mask was, as Sakamoto had predicted, the upper half of a skull, the crown starting at the edge of his hairline with the points of its teeth poking past the lines of Ryuji’s cheeks.

“It reflects your inner self. It’s the rebel that lies within.” Morgana explained, his massive blue eyes scanning up and down Sakamoto’s transformed appearance.

It suits him… somehow… Akira wondered, taking in how Sakamoto’s look seemed to accent his terrible posture with metal snaking up his crooked spine.

“Oh shit!” The blond screeched suddenly, causing him and Morgana to jump a little, “We’re so screwed!” Despite Sakamoto’s earlier confidence, it still seemed he was unsure of the whole situation.

“Keep your voice down!” Morgana yowled, just as loud as Sakamoto’s outburst.

“It don’t matter! The real Kamoshida is still going to have our asses!” Sakamoto growled out, shaking his fist at Morgana as if he were an old man.

Morgana sighed loudly in response, its furry appendages coming to rub at what Akira assumed to be its temples, “No, he won’t. I thought I already said this, but, your interactions in a palace don’t affect the real person in any way.” Sakamoto let out a huge sigh of relief, tension visibly exiting his body, causing his posture to, somehow, grow even more slouched. “A shadow is the true self that is suppressed—a side of themselves that they don’t want to see.” That, to Akira at least, was strange to hear. His one, and only, interaction with Kamoshida in the real world had him acting very much the same way as he did in his palace.

Maybe… he doesn’t like being that way then? Akira tried, though he knew it was much more likely that Kamoshida just didn’t view himself as a giant, perverted menace that was feared instead of adored, and also happened to be the target of two students and cat-thing.

“Sweet,” Sakamoto muttered lowly, the part of his face that his mask didn’t cover turning into a thoughtful frown, “Now all we’ve got to do is—“

“Wait!” Morgana interjected, its ears perking up straight, “I’ve helped you escape twice now, it’s time you held up your end of the deal.” Akira glanced over to Sakamoto, attempting to gauge the boy’s reaction, but the blond only looked as confused as Akira felt.
Morgana sighed.

“Remember what I told you? How I lost my true form?” Sakmato nodded, then Morgana rotated his bulbous head to look at him. The cat looked completely serious for once, any sign, as far as Akira could tell, of Morgana’s bravado and cockiness had disappeared. “I need to erase the distortion that occurred on my body and regain my real form.” There was a sudden and obvious shift in Morgana’s mood then, “But when I was investigating this place, that…” It trailed off, growling.

“Bastard?” Sakamoto supplied plainly, though the visible part of his face had tensed up since the last time Akira had looked at him.

“Bastard!” Morgana echoed, anger rolling off of his small body in massive waves, “Captured and tortured me! That’s why I…” Morgana trailed off once again, its giant eyes rolling towards the floor, “Need your help.” It whispered, so quietly and pitifully that Akira had barely managed to catch it. “After we take down Kamoshida, that is.”

Seems fair enough. Akira supposed, taking down Kamoshida was definitely going to make his parole much easier and infinitely less creepy, and while he had no idea how either he or Sakamoto were going to help a cat turn into a human, it was definitely worth it. Unless he got arrested, then it wouldn’t matter; nothing would matter then.

Sakamoto, however, seemed to disagree.

“What the hell!?” The blond shouted, seeming to have forgotten that they were soliciting on the cognitive property of someone that wanted them dead. “What are you going on about? We never said anything about helping you out…” Sakamoto argued, his frown turning into sheepish once he seemed to remember that Akira was very much alive.

“Sorry dude…” The blond muttered.

Akira shrugged, not really put off by the comment so much as he was by Sakamoto’s refusal.

He tugged out his cell phone as the cat started ranting, rather nonsensically, about honor among thieves and how they should be thanking him for the opportunity.

So Morgana is a male… Akira supposed it was a bit rude to refer to the cat as an it, but decided it would be even ruder to ask it what gender it was. A slight relief.

He’s helping us take down Kamoshida, it seems fair enough that we help him regain his true form, whatever that means.

Sakamoto frowned as he read the text that was shoved in his face, then he sighed.

“I guess you’re right…” He admitted quietly, casting a long look towards the castle they had just escaped from.

Sakamoto turned to Morgana, “Alright… I guess we can help you after we deal with Kamoshida, deal?” He then extended his gloved hand, Akira mimicked him and suddenly they were both shaking appendages with a smugly grinning cat.

“Deal!” Morgana replied gleefully. “Now you two should get out of here, make sure to come back tomorrow.”

Together, he and Sakamoto exited the cognitive world and were thrust back into the empty alley
that they’d entered from, Akira’s phone also informing them, rather joyfully for a robotic device, that they had returned to the real world.

Sakamoto turned to him then, surprising Akira, though he knew he shouldn’t be, by the amount of skin the blond’s face had, as well as how noticeably he expressed his thoughts.

“Uh,” The blond mumbled, leaning against the wall behind him, “Sorry for dragging you along in all this, and for forcing you to help and all.”

Akira was stunned for a moment, before taking out his phone and typing a reply.

I was planning to go anyway. I should be thanking you for saving my life, Sakamoto. Morgana should too but…

Sakamoto scoffed loudly, deadpanning at him with a vulgar frown on his lips, “Dude, what are you, an old man? Call me Ryuji; come on, say it with me: Ryu—“ Ryuji stopped talking as a flush took up space on his cheeks. Akira watched blankly as the blond began scratching the back of his neck, “Er… right, sorry.” He sighed.

Akira shrugged in reply, once again, not bothered by Sakamoto’s—Ryuji’s callousness, as much as he was bothered by something else; that something, in this instance, being the use of… Ryuji’s given name. Still, he supposed he owed it to his friend for saving his life, and it was a small, though uncomfortable, way to show his gratitude.

Thank you very much, Ryuji-san. He typed out, rather formally in a last-ditch effort to make Ryuji see why he might be uncomfortable.

Ryuji spluttered, then growled, then finally laughed loud it enough that it echoed off the walls encasing them. “Anyway, Akira,” Ryuji jabbed effectively, causing Akira’s face to sprout its own patch of color, “It ain’t that late, you wanna grab some food?” He asked, grinning brightly, “My treat.” The blonde taunted, as if that would help convince him.

Akira shrugged, then nodded in reply, pocketing his cell phone as the blond led the way out of the small network of alleys and towards the station.

The train ride was no less nauseating when he was with someone he knew, but it was much more embarrassing with Ryuji mocking him as opposed to sitting in silence like the rest of the passengers. Fortunately though, the train ride from the station near their school to where Ryuji, as well as himself, decided to get off was a short one, less than ten minutes. Akira followed the blond blindly, letting him be the guide while Akira was swept up into his thoughts once again.

Morgana said that Sakamoto has the potential… The way he’d understood it when Morgana had first been explaining it was that anyone with a strong sense of rebellion could awaken to a persona, which, if he now understood it, was untrue. Then again, he mused, there would be a lot more people randomly walking a palace… He wondered if that had happened, a similar instance to his and Ryuji’s story except they’d been alone and died because of it.

When did I become so morbid…

He, fortunately, did not have time to answer his own inquiry before they’d arrived, to Akira’s understanding, their destination. Ryuji held open the door for him and Akira slid past him and was assaulted by a thick wall of aroma. Equally as nauseating as the train had been, if not more so. The smell of cheap food was overwhelming. Still, he set forth, continuing to follow Ryuji until they were both seated at a bar that surrounded the source of the disarming scent.
Akira hadn’t been planning on ordering anything, the task being too complicated without verbal communication or a menu.

Ryuji slammed his fist on the bar, “Two large beef bowls!” He shouted once an employee was in earshot. “Two large beef bowls!” The employee, a sickly looking teen, most likely the same age as them, shouted towards the kitchen before running into said kitchen. Akira blinked, but ignored the oddity, assuming this to be one of Tokyo’s strange customs that he’d remained ignorant of in the few days he’d been here.

Minutes later, the same employee returned with two bowls filled with sizzling beef and set them in front of them. “Enjoy your meal!” He said in a poor attempt at cheerful before dashing off to another part of the restaurant. It was painfully obvious then what was going on, though he’d never seen it in practice, it seemed that the restaurant was very, very understaffed for the number of customers within the establishment. He turned his attention to Ryuji, feeling guilty for adding to the burden of an overworked employee; Ryuji however, had no qualms, and didn’t seem to notice the situation as his sole focus was on delivering the contents of the bowl as quickly as possible to his mouth. Which was mildly off-putting but also quite impressive.

“You’re not eating.” Ryuji said minutes later, his own bowl empty. Akira blinked, now seeing the food he’d been staring blankly at for several minutes.

“Sorry.” He signed out of reflex.

“I dunno what the means,” Ryuji said plainly, before tapping on Akira’s still full bowl, “We did a lot of runnin’ today, you need to fill up, you’re already a twig already…”

Akira shook his head, and reached into his pocket to grab at his phone.

I’m not hungry. Which was the truth, though Sakamoto looked skeptical, then met his gaze with a sad look in his eyes.

“Still upset about those pictures of Suzui?” The blond asked, his voice nothing more than a whisper.

Suzui… There was something weird—disgusting and horrid, about seeing a person, someone who went to their school and could have walked in front of him at school, and knowing what they looked like naked without knowing their name. His focus hadn’t been on the girl’s—Suzui’s nakedness at the time, but the sheer number of bruises that marked her; a large number of them, particularly around her arms, were in the shape of hands, giving her purple cuffs. It was… disturbing. Though it only reaffirmed his belief that they had to deal with Kamoshida.

Akira nodded.

“…Right, sorry.” Ryuji said, as if he could have prevented the blunder of seeing those images. “I’ll get you a box, just… make sure you eat it later, cool?” Akira nodded, feeling, once again, vulnerable and numb due to Kamoshida’s sickness.

Ryuji took the liberty of transferring the food from container to container and carried it with him as they exited the building. The walk to the station was quiet, well, he and Ryuji were quiet, everything else was painfully loud.

“Uh,” Ryuji said, extending the box of food towards him once they were inside the station, “Here.” Akira took the box, and smiled a little in an attempt to show gratitude to his friend for understanding.
“Gimme your phone!” The blond shouted once he’d turned around to head towards his terminal, he turned around once more, staring at the boy who had just yelled at him like he was going to rob him. “So I can text you, later, I mean.” He explained gruffly, scratching at his nose.

Akira did as he was told, handing over the device carefully. Sakamoto snatched it from his hand and began to snoop through it, his own phone positioned in his other hand while his attention switched between the two. “Sweet, we use the same app.” Ryuji muttered as he began typing.

An awkward amount of time later, in which they were both stared at by a large number of people, all of them muttering about delinquents, as if his criminal record were stapled to both their backs, Ryuji handed back the device with the their mutual chat application still open.

“I also put my number in there, just in case.” Ryuji said with a grin, “See ya tomorrow?”

Akira nodded. The sooner we destroy Kamoshida’s shadow, the better. Inside of him, something kind of… burst. A rush of elation rushed through him, though he couldn’t place why he was feeling that way. Arsene merely chuckled within him, not offering explanation, and his persona seemed benign enough that it couldn’t possibly be detrimental.

Smiling, he returned Ryuji’s wave, only just now noticing it, and headed towards his part of the station.

The train back to Yongen-Jaya was quiet, interestingly enough, though the additional silence only filled his need to organize his thoughts, which almost resulted in him missing his stop. The alleyway leading to LeBlanc was quiet too, though that wasn’t unusual from what he’d seen of it so far. He dragged his feet all the way from the station to the entrance of the café, trying to get as much time to think in as possible, though, he realized once he’d actually made it to the entrance, that he could be thinking while on the futon in Sakura-san’s attic.

Speaking of…

Sakura-san, he’d noticed once he’d finally opened LeBlanc’s heavy door, wasn’t positioned by the counter as Akira had almost always seen him. Instead, the man was lounging in one of the barstools, staring down at a puzzle book, though he looked up when Akira entered.

“I take it you actually went to school today?” Sakura-san asked, pinning him down with a sharp gaze that he avoided by staring at the floor, he’d have a better chance of memorizing the tile pattern than looking his new caretaker in the eyes, not without immense discomfort, at least.

Akira nodded stiffly, making sure his eyes didn’t have to leave the tiles surrounding his feet.

“Right…” The café owner said, not even attempting to keep his derision out of his tone, “Just remember, if you start causing any problems, you’ll be out of here.”

He nodded once more, only slightly annoyed of being reminded of his past decision, though there wasn’t anything he could do about it, which seemed to be a theme in his life, unfortunately.

Except for Kamoshida…

“Ah,” Sakura-san sighed out, “You’ve got dinner, which means I’m free to go. Try not to come back so damn late, I don’t want to keep waiting on you to come back, understood?” Waiting for Akira’s nod, which he provided very quickly at Sakura-san’s tone, the older man took to his feet and heading towards the only door of LeBlanc.

“Don’t forget to lock up.” Was muttered loudly enough for him to hear before the door to the café
was closing behind him.

He decided to handle Sakura-san’s request first, flipping the sign to indicate the café was closed, ignoring how uncomfortable it would have been if he just woke up to strangers being in the downstairs of his bedroom. He shuddered at the idea and took caution to make double-sure that the door to the café was locked. Slowly, he made his way towards the small kitchen of LeBlanc and placed his leftovers inside an empty space of Sakura-san’s fridge, which was utterly filled with what Sakura-san must use to craft his curry. Finally, he scuttled towards the stairs, the panel of light-switches right next to the staircase. Then he was free to linger inside of Sakura-san’s attic for as long as he liked. He didn’t linger long, though, not with exhaustion pulling down on his limbs the way it was. He, rather briefly, considered messaging Sakamoto—Ryuji to warn him about any strange dreams with an old man and a pair of twins, but, somehow, he barely managed to throw off his glasses, collect a change of clothes and stumble downstairs, back to the entrance of LeBlanc. Carelessly, he unlocked the door and slid into the streets of Yongen-Jaya. He took the effort to pretend that he was locking the door, for it would not bode well for him if Sakura-san’s café was ruined while he was bathing.

Across the street, adjacent to Yongen’s laundromat, was a bathhouse.

The fee was the toughest burden, though not as bank-breaking as he thought taking a bath in Tokyo would be. Small mercies, he supposed, walking past the attendant after a small bow. Said attendant ignored him in reply, making Akira wonder if he could have just walked by without paying, though that would most likely result in him being arrested and put in a high-security prison for crimes against humanity.

He smirked at his own joke, which was hidden from the other, though few, individuals who were also undressing around him. It was, very distinctly, an uncomfortable experience, one he wished to wash away from his mind. All at once, though, and against his conscious will, he started to miss home. Not his own home, exactly, but having an actual shower was nice. He missed the atmosphere, his few friends, the way he wasn’t stared at like a trespasser as he did anything, including sinking into the communal waters of Yongen-Jaya’s bathhouse.

Akira kept his head, firmly down, parallel to the fizzing water that was all but boiling the rest of his body. His attempt at discretion, however, was in vain as he felt more than saw a presence starting to linger beside him.

“You look like you’ve seen war, kid.” A voice barked beside his ear, loud enough to ensnare the attention of the other people stewing in the hot water.

“You look like you’ve seen war, kid.” A voice barked beside his ear, loud enough to ensnare the attention of the other people stewing in the hot water.

“Or fell down a mountain!” Another voice chimed in, a deep chuckle causing a small uproar of other kinds of laughter.

Akira tried to sink lower into the water. If I’d known there’d be this many people I wouldn’t have come. Yongen-Jaya’s population was deceitfully large if there were this many people taking a bath on a Tuesday.

Despite his efforts to remain secluded, even more men starting to drift towards him, asking him questions in varying tones, all of them leading, he supposed, to a rather direct question that seemed to quiet down the rest of the rowdy men that had somehow surrounded him.

“Where’d you get all those scars and bruises?” One asked, reaching across the pool to snatch at one of his wrists that had, until that point, been firmly crossed across his chest as a final line of defense. He tried to pull his arm away from the group of onlookers, only to meet with resistance similar to an iron vice, despite how soaked they all were, the man’s grip was surprisingly firm. He didn’t
dare to raise his other arm, though, in a desperate attempt to draw some space, then he’d surely be arrested, all joking aside.

Finally, after the stunning effect being called out had on him, he managed a response, a simple shrug of his shoulders. Without being able to speak, this situation was going to be hard to talk his way out of, more so than his usual problems.

“Someone bullying you, kid?” The first person to drift over asked, his voice accusatory, though gentle, somehow.

A better opening could not have been handed to him! Quickly, he nodded his head, making sure to keep his expression ashamed, though it wasn’t that difficult once the anger had subsided.

The men around him coddled him then, pitying him in a way, the ones that didn’t view him as a criminal, that adults often did.

“I don’t buy it!” The man who was still holding his wrist shouted, his grip tightening until Akira could feel each wave of pruned skin against his skin. “I mean, some of these look years old!” The man claimed, tugging on his arm painfully.

“C-chill, Touma, you’re making the kid uncomfortable.” Another said, reaching over to latch his hand onto the wrist that was coming close to crushing his arm.

The grip on his arm was released then, revealing a patch of purple… His heart dropped. Instantly, he recalled those… images of that girl. He climbed out of the pool, ignoring the protests of the men who weren’t grilling him, and found a trashcan before he could ruin the bathhouse’s flooring.

Akira escaped into the small locker room the place had to offer, quickly, he snatched up the basket that held his belongings and began drying off, the borrowed towel scratching painfully into his skin. Whether that betrayed its quality or how strong he was, he didn’t know, didn’t bother to know. His brain was in a frenzy at the moment and he just hoped he didn’t vomit again.

Once he’d managed to cooldown some, he found himself able to put down the towel, his skin already completely dry and bright red. Once he felt another presence however, his guard was back up instantly, ignoring the fact that he was still quite naked. He turned quickly, and came face to face with a rather… female customer. Normally, he’d been embarrassed, humiliated even, instead, he just stared at her, wondering if she’d start asking questions like those men had.

“I didn’t want to bother you with that crowd around,” The woman began pleasantly enough, tilting her head to the side to reveal sharp brown eyes. “But some of your wounds look pretty bad, maybe you should head up to the Yongen Clinic? It’s right up the street.”

Akira pondered her words, ignoring the fact that he was staring at a stranger while he was naked to wonder how large Yongen-Jay actually was to have its own hospital.

“You should head up now, though, I hear the doctor is pretty cranky when it gets late.” She said, sounding rather bemused with herself before walking to the other side of the small room.

He was, simply put, relieved to leave the bathhouse. He couldn’t recall ever being some humiliated in his entire life, and was thankful for the cool spring breeze that cooled the flames in his cheeks.

Some medicine would be good for dealing with Kamoshida’s guards, he contemplated, ignoring the
assuring hum of the shadows within him. *But it was risky enough leaving the first time...* His earlier perception that Yongen-Jaya was proving to be more and more false, which meant that someone could waltz into the café and vandalize it while he was gone. Still, his wrist was still hurting from earlier. Sighing, he walked back up the steps of LeBlanc, deposited his uniform onto one of the few hangers he owned and hung it from the ceiling. Next, though he really wished he could stop his body for a moment to consider the rationality of what he was about to do, he grabbed his cell phone and rushed down the steps of LeBlanc, managing to escape the building before he could consider whether or not the pain could wait until morning. Again, he pretended to lock the door to the café, and quickly strode of the street, trying his best not to look like someone who’d just fled their caretaker’s café which they left unlocked because he didn’t have a key, though he really wasn’t sure what that looked like, so Akira settled for a rather passive expression while he stared at the walkway of Yongen.

The neon was a telltale sign of what he was looking for, the bright cross was also an indicator, though the building itself looked very little like a hospital. Carefully, he opened the door and observed the very small waiting room that housed all of three chairs, only to be interrupted by a voice calling out to him.

“Ah, there you are, I’ve been expecting you.” Something about the statement made him distinctly uncomfortable, and when he turned around to face the counter of the small hospital, he found out why.

*It’s... the same person...* He realized, taking in the same look that her dark eyes gave him, though he didn’t fail to notice the cheeky grin that had enveloped her now colored lips.

“The doctor is waiting for you, head into the examination room.” She said, shutting the panel that opened her desk to the rest of the room.

He, however briefly, considered leaving, but the supernatural *burn* he felt in his wrist and the aching in his head because of it caused him to disregard his instincts, something he hoped he wouldn’t live to regret. Hoping to get this over with as quickly as possible, Akira strode across the small waiting area and tugged open the door to the examination room. The smell of chemicals was strong, but not unpleasant, much to his surprise. The room was smaller than the last, he noticed, barely housing all of the equipment stored inside. Settled into the limited seating of the examination room was the same woman from the bathhouse and the receptionist’s desk not a moment ago. Fortunately, both of them were now dressed in actual clothing instead of towels. He understood now why the woman had been laughing earlier when she had mentioned the doctor, which turned out to be herself, was quite the grouch.

“Have a seat.” She said, not offering any further pleasantries as she waved a hand towards a small bed.

Akira followed her instructions, hoping that this situation, however strange, wouldn’t turn into disastrous.

Once he was seated, she scooted her chair closer until she was nearly hovering over him, “I didn’t quite get a good look earlier, would you mind rolling up your sleeves?”

Akira hesitated, distinctly uncomfortable with the intensity of her gaze, however clinical she remained, but yielded quickly, knowing that it would be the fastest way to make his wrist stop aching as much as it was. Bashful, more than mortified, he rolled up the sleeves on his nightshirt, exposing his arms all the way up to his elbows, where the material of his shirt was currently bundled up. A thoughtful hum filled the cramped space between them as the woman observed his arms; Akira looked too, too fretful to look towards the doctor and too nervous not to keep her
within his field of vision.

“Some of these look quite fresh.” She murmured thoughtfully. Akira had the feeling her words weren’t said to initiate a response. “And,” She continued, wrapping her cold fingers around his arm like a snake, making him flinch slightly from the unexpected action, despite the fact that he’d seen it coming, “Some of them look quite old.” Suddenly, Akira knew she was staring into his face, he could feel it like a physical presence and it was as cold, if not more so, than her hands. He didn’t match the look like he had in the bathhouse.

She continued to gauge each of the wounds on his arm, “I have the feeling, if I ask, you’re not going to tell where you got these.” He grimaced, but shook his head; was he truly so easy to read?

“And are these the only ones?” He nodded silently, staring at the dark color of her nails as they whisked around the damaged skin.

“I don’t think I believe you.” She all but hissed, leaving Akira stunned, so much that his useless mouth dried up completely. “No refusal? You’re a quiet one, hm?”

“Take off your shirt,” She instructed firmly, “I need to confirm for your records.”

Record? The fear of prison nearly overwhelmed him, rooting him in ways that this woman’s sternness failed. He swallowed nervously, but did as instructed, wishing adults weren’t so assertive, that they didn’t hold so much power over a kid like him.

He stood there, holding his balled-up shirt between shaking hands.

Sounding bemused with his obvious nervousness, she continued relaying instructions, “Turn around.”

Once he finally twisted around on the small bed, exposing his back to the woman, he heard a small gasp, which was immediately covered in a small coughing fit.

“Your…” She starts, trailing off quickly, like a candle being extinguished. Not for the first time, he wished he could talk, even for five minutes, to offer an explanation, to deny what he’d willingly exposed about himself to a complete stranger, doctor or not.

As if drawn to him, the woman’s cold fingers began tracking down his spine, then spreading out to his shoulder blades, and despite the chill that the room held, he felt his face burn once more.

“These scars…” She says, using that ugly, ugly word, “Where did you get them?” She asked, despite knowing that he wouldn’t answer.

One of her fingers trailed over a pattern of them, “I demand an answer, or I’ll call the police.” She demanded quietly, though it was still enough to make his entire body seize up. Quickly, he turned around on the small bed, facing her and actually looking at her, only to shake his head frantically.

She couldn’t do this! His mind screamed, a complete contrast to what he was expressing.

The doctor stared back at him, clearly unimpressed, then reached back, towards a desk, only to grab a wireless phone. Clearly, no amount of silent pleading would change her mind, still he had to try.

Once she began dialing, Akira quickly changed tactics, tugging his own phone from his pockets and frantically typing, hoping to get something out before she actually called the police on him!
I shouldn’t have come here! His brain chided while his fingers dashed across the screen.

Please don’t call the police! Quickly, he shoved the text in her face, and the action seemed to startle the woman enough that she actually dropped the phone!

Thank god…

“You’re—you don’t speak?” She asked, clearing her throat, gazing at him curiously, like she might start prodding at him.

He nodded quickly and frantically in response.

She taps her chin with a painted nail, “I want you to tell me where you got those scars then, and you better not lie, I’ll know.” She cautioned, reaching down to reach the wireless phone.

“How bad could the truth be?” Arsene hummed quietly from within him, making him regret leaving LeBlanc all over again.

He sat there, panicking, under the look of the mystery doctor, while she sighed impatiently.

Finally, though, after much deliberation, knowing that if he made a run for it, he wouldn’t be able to escape, and even if he did, police would be all over Yongen-Jaya looking for a stupid kid. Adults had, once again, put him in an unwinnable situation.

Don’t tell anyone. He typed instead.

She stared at him from around his phone after reading it, “Patient Confidentiality.” She promised, losing the intense look she had been pinning him with once it became apparent that he was giving in. He had lost the will to fight an unwinnable battle.

My parents did this to me. Akira read over his statement several times, wishing the words weren’t true. He also wished that tears weren’t threatening to trail down his face, but he couldn’t help that either.

The doctor stared, and stared, and stared at his confession. After minutes of holding up his phone to the woman, his arm finally gave out, and he lowered it, placing it on the bed beside him.

Now knowing what she does, Akira wasn’t surprised that, when he looked up, the doctor’s entire face was overwhelmed in a pitying look.

He averted his gaze, as he often does in situations like this one.

“And your weight?” She asks eventually, reaching around his folded up legs to grab at his hips.

He flinched, wishing he would just die, right then and there.

Insistently, she pushed her phone into his hands, and he had already said too much already, what was a little more.

A useless mouth doesn’t need to eat. He admitted, causing not only the doctor to gasp, but also Arsene.

The doctor’s face took on a sickly pallor, looking almost translucent under the bright lights of the examination room, though Akira couldn’t see her face clearly for long, as big globs of liquid look place in front of his eyes, only to quickly course down his twitching cheeks and neck.
“I think I should call someone… clearly your parents shouldn’t have kids if they’re treating their own like this.” The doctor said numbly, as she began typing on the phone, only for Akira to finally do something by slapping it out of her hand, sending the clunky plastic sliding across the floor.

**Don’t!** He pleaded once more, only to be met with a look of complete and utter confusion.

**I’m not living with them.** Her arms quickly folded over her chest.

“Then where are you living? Not on the streets, surely?” She pressed with a narrowing over her eyes, she looked furious, he just hoped it wasn’t at him, though that was bound to be the case.

**I live with a caretaker while I’m under probation.** He explained, feeling stupid for mentioning his probation unnecessarily, even while under intense scrutiny and emotional turmoil.

*As long as she doesn’t call the police…* He prays, knowing that he couldn’t continue to slap the phone out of her hand indefinitely.

“Probation?” She asks, staring him up and down as if he’d grown a new limb, “N-never mind, that’s not any of my business…” She stutters, reaching behind her once more, while Akira stares at her, feeling like a caged animal about to face slaughter; but instead of another phone, or even a weapon, Akira is bewildered to see as the doctor tugs a clipboard out from under a stack of papers, sets in her lap, and begins to write.

Minutes pass before she finally stops writing, in that time Akira finally managed to calm down, slightly, at least, which was better than nothing.

“I’m… going to give you these medicines.” She says, handing over the sheet of paper she’d been writing on, “They should help you recover your weight and heal those scars.” He nods, confused, as he reads through the small list of items he’s never heard of, only to realize he has no money to actually pay for the prescriptions she’s piling on her desk, and then dumping into his arms after he’s pulled his shirt back on.

Finally, she releases him, and takes the liberty of walking him to the door of the small hospital, though he can’t deduce another reason besides pity.

“Come by again next week, so I can make a progress report.” Akira finds himself nodding along to what she says as she ushers him out of the building.

Before he turns to finally escape the terror that is the nightlife of Yongen, he turns back to the mystery doctor and bows deeply, careful not to drop any of the medicine.

It’s only when he’s finally behind the locked door of LeBlanc, the café fortunately untouched, that he realized that he didn’t actually pay for any of the medicine that she’d given him.

*Maybe she felt bad…* He wondered, examining the labels on each of the jars in the safety of LeBlanc’s attic.

Suddenly, though, Akira finds himself exhausted, the adrenaline and terror that had been keeping him conscious finally weaning into nothing now that he’s under LeBlanc’s roof. He wonders if every day in Tokyo would be like this, where he’s feeling *good* for once, where he’s actually doing something to help someone, only to crash hard, to have his past brought up in the most painful of ways to the point where he’s crying like a child while he begs a stranger not to call the police.

He certainly hoped not.
The doctor is Tae, obviously, in case that was somehow unclear. Let me know what you guys think, I really enjoy getting to interact with people that read my stories, because you all seem to have some really good suggestions.

Also, would you guys be interested in following me on Tumblr? It's not writing focused, but that's a good way to message me if you don't feel comfortable leaving comments.

Anyways, thanks for reading! :)}
I said I was going to update like, 4 days ago. But THEN EVERYTHING WENT BAD. First my power was out for an entire day, yikes. Then once that hell was finally over, I was struck by the most powerful migraine in my entire life. It lasted for two (2) days. But it finally went away, and then I continued writing~ I was going to make this chapter much longer, all the way until the treasure, but I figured it was due for an update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akira woke up feeling miserable, it was becoming a problem, and not one that he could blame on the stuffy attic of Café LeBlanc, nor on the Metaverse, though neither of those things helped in terms of his nightmares, except with the occasion of the strange prison that he was currently trapped in. Before either of the wardens could start banging on the metal bars that separated them from him, as they had done the other two times he had been in this situation, he quickly stood up and walked to the cell’s iron door, staring out towards the desk in the distance, where the man from before lingered, bathed in blue light.

“Welcome back to the Velvet Room, Trickster.” The man said pleasantly, as if Akira had willingly locked himself inside of a cell. The figure leaned forward, resting his elbows on the sturdy desk between them, yet another barrier.

*Trickster?* He wondered, confused as to why he’d be called that instead of the *thief* he’d been anticipating; though he did not miss as *this* place, this prison was finally given a title. *The Velvet Room,* it sounded like a business, and not a good one. Though the prison cells, all empty except for his from what he can tell, and the rude wardens spoke for the venue in volumes.

“I wanted to resume our previous conversation from the night before, and that is why I have summoned you.” The man said without further preamble, “As I have said before, your rehabilitation determines if ruin can be stopped. Yet, it is not a task that can be accomplished by you alone.”

The man across the room chuckled sinisterly, “But today, you have entered a partnership with someone who awoke to the same power, did you not?”

Akira nodded dutifully, thinking back on how Ryuji had saved both him and Morgana by awakening to his persona.

A grin, if Akira could call it that, spread across the man’s face, “Excellent.” He rumbled, “Involving yourself with others is an important foundation for your recovery. You have done well.”

Akira was not the best at making friends, taking into account that they would have to learn sign language or wait for him to write every response, it was not exactly *easy* for him to simply involve himself with others, as the man had put it; yet, he can’t help but yearning for those bonds, like the ones he shared with Morgana and Ryuji, where he would jump in front of them to save them. It was quite nice; though he doubted, for obvious reasons, that friendships were like that, or supposed to be. Once they took down Kamoshida’s shadow, Ryuji wouldn’t have a need for him to be around.
The same thing could be said for Morgana as well, once the cat returned to its body, Akira doubted that his presence would be appreciated. Still, it seemed of vital importance that he at least tried, for the sake of avoiding ruin, whatever that entailed, and that he would probably go crazy with only Sakura-san to communicate with for the next year.

“With that said,” The man continued, staring at him over his very large nose, “I am not advising you to form superficial relationships. It must not be of frivolity that these bonds are formed, but a ring of those who would, by morals or faith, lend you their strength. In other words, they are bonds with those who have been robbed of their places to belong.”

That made more sense. Ryuji’s leg had been broken, taking him away from the track team, and Morgana had been robbed of his true form, making him unable to return to the real world. Though that latter was just his conjecture, for all he knew Morgana could have been lying about having a true form outside of his cat body.

“Personas are the strength of heart…” One of the wardens, the softer sounding one, explained, sounding similar to Morgana’s explanation of the heart. “The stronger the bonds around you, the more power your persona will gain.”

“Indeed,” The man interrupted, “You should use anyone, including myself and your wardens, or your ambitions will not come to fruition.”

The man chuckled again, “Now, let us form a deal. In exchange for proving your worth thus far, I will lend you a fraction of my power.”

Suddenly, a burst of elation flooded him, just like it had earlier that day with Sakamoto. Suddenly, a wealth of knowledge was thrust into his sense, ancient explanations of previous tricksters and a plethora of their abilities.

Tricksters, the man’s voice rang in his head, they are those who have nurtured themselves through rehabilitation, who have avoided the ruin that was endangering the world around them. Their memories will, no doubt, prove useful to you.

His head began throbbing, confusion turning his logic into nothing but shattered glass on the floor of his mind. There were others. He realized idly, scratching at his aching head. Other tricksters, or thieves, or whatever they were called. Rarely did Akira feel he belonged somewhere, he could probably count those instances on his fingers, but having his brain filled with memories of those who had done what he had to do, who could relate to him in a way no others could, it was incredibly uplifting. A fraction of his loneliness dissipated with the knowledge that had been shared with him, knowing there were others whose footsteps he would follow; he wasn’t a passenger to his own life! He could use these memories to guide him the right way, to avoid ruin, whatever that entailed. For the first time since he awakened to his power, he didn’t feel… useless.

“I see something within you has changed, Trickster, now let us form a contract!” The man said, grinning wickedly at him, “I suppose it is time we divulge in the other’s identities. Is that not human etiquette, Kurusu Akira?” A shiver traveled up his spine at the way the man said his name, though he couldn’t explain it past the exhaustion and adrenaline that his brain was currently attempting to process.

“I am Igor.” The man, Igor said, adjusting the sheet of cloth in the pocket of his suit quickly before flourishing out his arm towards the more passive warden. “This is Justine, and this,” He continued, pointing towards the other warden, who was clapping a metal baton in her hand, “Is Caroline. They will serve as guides through your rehabilitation, in turn, I hope you will prove your worth to them.”
“I look forward to working with you further, Trickster.” Justine said primly, turning to look at him for the first time. Caroline said nothing in introduction at first, but eventually turned to him as Igor continued to stare at the small girl, “R-right… now get lost, inmate!”

With that, he was cast into oblivion, his previous nightmares turned to nothing. Nothing turned into him being half conscious of the buzzing that was interrupting his nothingness, but he was able to ignore it until it went away. Unfortunately, a part of him knew his morning self too well, as the buzzing continued once again after a short break. He flailed like a child, begging the earth to give him more time to sleep, but found himself sitting up anyway, part of him knowing that he was on an incredibly short leash after his tardiness two days ago. Still, he didn’t have to like it. Akira pushed the blanket off his body and worked himself into a standing position, knowing that it would be the best way to avoid falling back asleep. Finally, he lowered himself onto the wooden panels of the attic’s ceilings and grabbed at his phone. Or, he was going to until he spotted something that made his hand pause in motion.

His body welled with anguish and embarrassment and relief.

On the floor, in a small pile, were the bottles of medicine that the doctor from last night had shoved into his arms, the ones that would help him be better. Akira was grateful, but there was a part of him that couldn’t ignore the fact that someone knew; an adult that threatened him to help him, if he could call it help. He thought back to the doctor’s orders, but couldn’t find it in himself to open any of the concoctions. He didn’t deserve them, he didn’t ask for them, and more importantly, he didn’t need them. Ignoring the pile of pills and creams, he finally grabbed his phone, previous apprehension melting into dim frustration, not at the doctor for trying to help, but just at adults in general.

Fortunately, he wasn’t going to be late, regardless of pace, but that still didn’t help the fact that he was completely drained of energy from exploring Kamoshida’s heart in addition to what was supposed to be a relaxing escape.

His uniform was still a bundled mess from where he’d thrown it from when he had returned from the bathhouse, but it’s not like the populace of Shujin expected him to be prim as they themselves were, nor did he think that they would see past his criminal record to notice whether or not he had actually put forth the effort to his appearance, not that he did, aside from the glasses that slid over his ears and nose comfortably. Dressing only took a minute, and washing his face and brushing his teeth look only double that, and grabbing his bag only took the time it took him to walk back up the stairs. Then he was ready for another day of his probation.

Sakura-san said nothing to him, nor offered him breakfast, a small mercy Akira thought, though the older man’s silence could also be interpreted that Sakura-san knew that he’d left LeBlanc last night and was debating on calling the police; he hadn’t taken into account that people might gossip about the scrawny scarred kid that cried at the bathhouse. He just hoped that none of them were regulars at LeBlanc, though, knowing his luck, that group of men, as well as the doctor who had cornered him, would all be craving LeBlanc’s coffee at the same time as their scheduled gossip time. He flipped the sign to Café LeBlanc, trying, though not succeeding, not to worry about it further. The walk, as expected of Yongen at this point, was a quiet one, and the train was mostly empty once it arrived, though that changed very quickly once the deathtrap swept past the other stops on the line. His previous unease with the train system seemed to dwindled a bit, though he was still skeptical of the system altogether as rumors of accidents occurring across Tokyo became even more frequent, as well as a some sort of crime show, according to three girls who were giggling loudly over the cute star, Akechi, a couple of seats away.

The short walk from the station to Shujin was short, but also informative; apparently there was a
sports rally at Shujin. The news did not settle well in his stomach as Kamoshida was frequently mentioned, and Akira made a conscious effort to ignore the loud conversation from the boys walking in front of him, fortunately, they were first years and continued ascending the building while he got to stop on the second floor.

Everyone stared at him as he walked in, and just as quickly as the room went silent, the noise picked back up again, whispers of his name trailing across the room and more than a dozen pair of wary eyes tracking his every movement as he made his way to his seat; it was the first time he really wished he didn’t have the window seat, but probably not the last. The topic of conversation quickly shifted to his more sinister activities, all inflated for the sake of conversation, some of it making him cringe, though he knew better than to let his expression shift from anything but passive neutrality, lest any teachers deem him a threat to society, a genuine concern. The other comments though were much too ridiculous to even consider, or he hoped they seemed that way; he was fairly certain, only fairly, that he did not look or act a mass-murderer who was looking for a high-school victim as the reason he decided to return to high school. Again, he hoped his peers, could see the hyperbole for what it was. Though he was more curious as to how the student body even knew about his probation.

“Okay!” Kawakami’s voice was enough to pull him from his thoughts, “As you all know, today is the volleyball rally.” Akira had no knowledge of this, though volleyball was apparently Shujin’s staple sport according to rumor, aside from track. “Head to the gymnasium once you have changed. Got it?” Her tone easily indicating what her face did not, especially to him, since he was the fast victim of the teacher’s impartial gaze. He tried not to let it bother him, to suddenly be thrust into a world where he couldn’t be trusted, to be treated like a naughty animal, an animal who had a white board! He avoided her stare, careful not to let anything slip into his blank expression as he nodded dutifully at his desk.

He was much more cautious about getting changed this time, and the added reputation of being a murderous criminal helped keep eyes off of him, once the girls were guided out of the classroom by Kawakami, Akira quickly gazed around the room, making sure that no adults or other students were looking at him. Which was, thankfully, the case; most of them were busy making small talk, exchanging rumors mostly, or talking about some of the girls that had just left in very unwholesome ways. Takamaki was a prominent point in each conversation he heard. Akira tried not to think of how weird it was to be listening to conversations about the girl that sat in front of him as he pulled of his shirt, careful not to make any exaggerated movement or being too slow that he’d draw attention; though he was rather quick in pulling on his Shujin track suit from under his desk, a bright red eyesore, very dissimilar to the red of his Metaverse outfit. When his head popped through the head hole of his t-shirt, he noticed that nobody was looking, whether that had to do with his reputation or the distraction presented in Takamaki and Kamoshida’s secret relationship, he had no idea, nor did he put much thought into it. Changing into the track pants was much less frustrating or anxiety inducing, his legs not holding much evidence, aside from a few, less noticeable scars. Unless someone decided to misconstrue his leg hair for a dangerous weapon; and he wasn’t wearing any embarrassing underwear, another small grace.

Akira made sure not to be the first one out, nor the last, and while he made a conscious effort to remain somewhere in the middle, no student wanted to be near him, and he ended up in a small line of himself, the boys in front and behind him keeping a safe arm’s length away. It ruined the normal high school student aura he had been attempting to give off, especially to the faculty that happened to sweep by their line with a glare at their deformed formation. Akira pretended not to notice anything out of the ordinary as he shuffled forward along with every other second year until they were finally in enveloped in the raw heat of Shujin’s gym.

The gym was much less orderly than Kawakami’s impression had made on him. There was also a
lot of screaming and cheering, with Kamoshida’s voice residing somewhere in the center of it. Akira, against his better judgement, slunk off towards the side of the gym, where nobody was squatting. It wasn’t any less blistering in the corner than where he had been earlier, but at least there was nobody around to avoid being near him. The secluded corner, while not offering any cooling to his rapidly warming body, did provide him with a decent enough view of the sight he had been trying to avoid.

Currently, Kamoshida’s giant jaw was bouncing up and down as he rattled off names and positions, presumably of players that were about to participate in this rally he was supposed to have known about. His name was, fortunately, not called upon, nor did any name he recognized, and Akira allowed himself to get swept away in the sight of Kamoshida’s stature, his identical resemblance to his shadow, minus the cape and underwear. The being had been fast enough to dodge bullets from Sakamoto’s persona, and had a small legion of guards to protect him, very dissimilar to the five other faculty members on his side of the court, cheering him on as he served the ball over the net with, Akira admitted, impressive speed and power, though his landing from where he had jumped left the man staggering a small bit.

A weakness? He considered, trying to peer more closely at his enemy’s legs, not even wondering when he had started to consider the real Kamoshida his enemy instead of just the being inside of his heart. Kamoshida’s legs, much like his shadow, held a thick coat of fur, making it difficult to see the skin underneath it.

“Pretty exciting, huh?” The sudden question was enough to make him jump, sending his heart into overdrive, but when he looked up at the looming figure that had somehow managed to sneak up on him, he only found Sakamoto slouching like a delinquent, but a friendly delinquent, aside from the quick glare he sent towards the volleyball court before flopping down gracelessly next to Akira, causing a rumble of gossip to emit, seemingly from nowhere. His name, in tandem with Sakamoto’s, quickly spread across the room, and stares that had previously been trained on Kamoshida were now on the two of them. He quickly began studying his shoes, pretending the stares of his peers didn’t make the walls feel like they were closing in around him. Sakamoto seemed to notice, how could he not, but didn’t appear fazed, just maintained his simple, bored expression as he gazed around the blazing gymnasium.

“Ain’t you hot?” Sakamoto asked, indicating he wasn’t pressing for an answer to his last question. He shook his head in denial, adjusting the sleeves on his tracksuit until they were past his wrists and covering his knuckles. The blond shrugged, stretching languidly, seeming unbothered that Akira wasn’t the standards for a conversationalist; though, if Kamoshida’s shadow was any indicator, Ryuji, much like himself, didn’t really have any else to chat with either, which was good for him, at least. Which wasn’t to say that he did feel a little guilty at plummeting what was left of Sakamoto’s reputation.

Silently, their gazes drifted towards the other side of the gym, where Kamoshida was preening under the spotlight and praise of both student and faculty on his volleyball abilities. Sakamoto, unlike Akira himself, was able to voice his disdain for the teacher vocally; muttering expletives towards the older man in rapid succession.

Kamoshida, as if he had heard Sakamoto’s trash talk, mimicked by Akira’s thoughts, only to a lesser degree, decided to prove with undisputable finality that he was, in fact, a terrible human being. Akira watched, awestruck, as the faculty member winded his arm back and slung it forward twice as fast, sending the ball in front of him whipping through the air with an audible whistle, only to slam directly into a kid’s face. The kid, predictably, fell down, propelled by the blast of Kamoshida’s attack. The teacher’s face twisted into grim satisfaction, the kind that his shadow had on his face every time they had crossed paths, but as quickly as the expression was adopted, it was
changed, in a similar way as he, himself, switched personas. It was memorizing. It was sickening. Beside him, Ryuji growled like a feral beast, but remained seated as a group of faculty members surrounding the struck student, who was still prone on the floor.

“Sorry about that!” Kamoshida’s voice rang out in acted worry, “Someone take him to the nurse’s office!” Ordered as if the man, the same one who had caused the incident, could not easily do so himself with his broad shoulders and arms powerful enough to force someone into unconsciousness with only a volleyball.

Kamoshida was proving himself to be quite the adversary. He just hoped, between the three of them, that his shadow would be easier to handle.

Akira watched, astounded, as two students, with bruises similar to the ones now visible and blossoming on the victim’s face, drug the unconscious boy away only to have his attentions forced back onto his target, his enemy, as Kamoshida stood from the floor, a twisted smile grappling for control of his lips, “Alright! Let’s resume the match!” He cheered, as if his strength had not just injured a student. Nobody objected.

By the time the rally was over, Akira was nearly regretful that he hadn’t been picked to play, he was practically bristling in agitation, watching Kamoshida prance around under the praise of both student and teacher. It was, simply put, infuriating. He was glad, however, that the attention had been saddled on Kamoshida alone, none of the hundreds of people packed in the gym had noticed him, which allowed both him and Sakamoto to make a quick escape just before the last game had ended. This had allowed him to change out of his clothes without the worry of an audience, as well as avoid the traffic that would no doubt occur after the rally had ended.

Once the last bell of the day finally rang, signaling they were all free to go, regardless of their state of dress, Akira made sure to be the first one out of the classroom, not even attempting to appear that he wasn’t in a rush, because he was. Just as quickly, he dug into his pockets and pulled out his cell phone to text Ryuji.

“Meet by the gate, please.” He tapped out, but was unable to send the message as both he and his phone were sent in opposite directions, though both sharing the floor as their final destination.

At first, he was too stunned to think, let alone to react at suddenly being thrown to the floor, but soon enough, after righting his glasses, he was able to not only see the scene he had created, but also react. Quickly, Akira clambered to his feet, ignoring the jitteriness and the weakness in them. The person who had bumped into him, or he into her, performed the same set of actions, rubbing at their head, presumably where his face had collided with hers.

Unable to speak, he ducked his head lowly, embarrassed for not having noticed someone blocking his path, only to notice there were now papers on the ground that hadn’t been here the last time he had raced through this hall. The deduction was easy enough to decipher, and all the more embarrassing. He lowered himself to the floor and quickly began stacking the papers he’d presumably knocked out of this stranger’s hands. Fortunately, they all seemed to be copies of the same text, and he was able to just mindlessly stack them until they were back into the shape they had been before he had decided to run down the halls.

Now... to keep the girl quiet... He thought, both darkly and with slight amusement, hoping that this incident wouldn’t be further embellished or result in his expulsion. Yet, when he looked up, finally facing the girl he had become a hazard for, her expression hadn’t held what he had been expecting, fear of the transfer student, pain at being tipped over, or annoyance at having her papers spread across the floor. Instead, the girl tilted her head to the side, looking both sheepish and terrified.
“S-sorry!” The girl uttered where Akira himself could not. “I wasn’t watching where I was going…” She concluded more softly. Akira, naturally, said nothing and instead extended his hands, where the girl’s papers were stacked once again. She removed her gaze from his face and lowered it to his extended hands, and Akira watched as one of her eyes bulged out slightly in an unidentifiable emotion, the other was sealed shut with thick purple skin.

“Oh!” She gasped out, “I... bumped into you, but you--- uh, thank you, I mean!” She said quickly, bowing in additional thanks. He shook his head, attempting not to be rude, it was really his fault, and he just couldn’t dispute it while he was still holding her items. “I was just… in the way, right? S-sorry” She mumbled out. Again, he shook his head, though now he was just a bit confused, it had obviously been his fault and yet this girl was apologizing.

“I haven’t seen you around before, now that I think of it.” She said after a long moment of still not taking her papers back. Akira kept his face painfully blank in an attempt to rob his face of any betraying expressions. “You must be the transfer student everyone is talking about?” She inquired, though it sounded like more of a hesitant statement. The quiver in his tone was painfully apparent, even while the space around them were quickly enveloped in noise as the other second years made their escape from the building.

Akira nodded, knowing it would be nearly pointless for him to deny it. The girl stared at him with her one good eye for another long, long moment, time he could have been using to chase down Kamoshida within his palace, but was instead staring at the floor of Shujin Academy while a person he had knocked over was staring at him.

“T-thank you again, a-and just, um, don’t let those rumors get to you, okay?” Finally taking her papers, and also handing over his phone, something he hadn’t noticed she picked up until just now. He inclined his head politely, no room to bow as he should for something so genuine, and sweet. It was refreshing, not feeling like complete garbage once the people around him knew who he was.

Akira was finally able to send his message to Sakamoto, who responded in affirmation before Akira was even at the bottom of the staircase. When Akira made it to the gates of Shujin Academy, however, there was another blonde waiting for him.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?” Takamaki asked, tone implying that she would, in fact, be talking to him whether he agreed or not. Instead of testing this theory, and wasting even more time, he simply nodded.

“I heard what happened with Suzui, in the hallway just now,” His blood ran cold then, thinking back to that Kamoshida’s hidden room. That had been Suzui? That meek girl that he knocked over in the hallway? It seemed unlikely, surely he would have recognized her! Bile swam just behind his tongue, begging to be ejected. “She seemed to think you were a good guy, but there’s something with you, ya know?” She asked seriously, twirling her hair as she considered him, seeming unaware at the near panic-attack she had just given him. “And you saved me from Kamoshida just yesterday…” She tacked on, as if there were any relevance in her two statements; “And the other day, when that teacher covered for you about being late…”

She stepped forward, blocking the sun from reaching his face by standing over him, “…And there’s this weird rumor going around about you, too.” Takamaki finally said, finger still twisting her blonde hair like a gear in an overcomplicated machine.

Akira had no response but to take a step back, creating some distance between them and cutting off the weird stare that Takamaki insisted on piercing him with.

“Whaddya want with him?” The voice of the blond he had been expecting rang out more suddenly
than he’d been anticipating and Akira couldn’t suppress a flinch before his frame twisted to affix his gaze upon Ryuji. Hesitantly, he raised his hand in greeting, only for it to be ignored while the two glared at each other.

“I could say the same for you! You’re not even in our class.” She responded, suspicion ringing out like a church bell, as she turned around to face the newcomer. Akira took the time to slip a little further back, a little closer to Sakamoto and the school gates.

Akira watched as his teammate frowned, sulkily, “We… just so happened to get to know each other, s’all.”

Takamaki crossed her arms, folding pale skin over the burgundy of her school tracksuit, “What do you plan on doing to Kamoshida-sensei?” She asked Sakamoto bluntly, causing even Akira to wince.

**Is that the rumor she mentioned?** This could end up being disastrous if Takamaki was as honest as she was, apparently, observant.

“Huh!?” Ryuji squeaked out, shrill as a mouse before his entire demeanor changed, the surprised lines of his face morphing into something more sinister, more serious. “…I see. I getcha.” The blond ground out forcibly, the tone completely at odds with his relaxed posture, “You’re all buddy-buddy with Kamoshida after all!” He accused.

Akira… Akira had a hard time believing Sakamoto’s words. From what he had seen, and been a part of, Takamaki wanted as far away from Kamoshida as either of them, enough so that the girl would force other students, Akira doubted he was the only one, into following up on her mediocre acting. Not to mention she didn’t even remember his name.

He could feel the girl’s temper flair up like a physical presence, and he scooted back a step or two, edging towards the gap in the school gates that Sakamoto and Takamaki weren’t crowding.

“This has nothing to do with you, Sakamoto.” Takamaki snipped, making Akira question for the first time just how these two knew each other.

“If you found out what he was doin’ behind your back, you’d dump him right away.” Sakamoto replied, all but growling the words at the girl.

The girl took a step back, opening a gap in the blocked entrance that allowed several awkward students to slip past without interrupting the dispute that was going on, Akira was, unfortunately, not among them. Instead, he decided to wait patiently for Sakamoto to try and convince Takamaki about her supposed relationship with Kamoshida. Which, even for a rumor, made him sick to his stomach; especially in conjunction with his recent recollections about Suzui.

“Behind my back?” She finally asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sakamoto sighed, shooting him a look, one that Akira, in his rather limited knowledge, couldn’t decipher. “You wouldn’t get it.” The blond told her.

Takamaki rolled her hair over her shoulder as if physically dusting off Ryuji’s words, “Anyway, people are already talking about you two. I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, but nobody is going to help you.” The girl faltered slightly, “I’m… warning you, just in case. That’s all.” With that Takamaki walked away, leaving Akira thoroughly confused. He barely knew the girl, yet she had singled them out to warn them.

It seemed rather fishy.
“Why’s she gotta be so aggressive all the time?” Sakamoto muttered, watching the blonde walk back towards the building with a sour look on his face. Ryuji’s wording did not escape him and he quirked a brow in his companion’s direction.

Ryuji casually, in a manner that he performed most of his actions, at least to Akira’s experience, raised an arm and waved his hand as if clearing a foul scent from the area.

“You wanted to go back to that castle, right? That’s why you texted me.” Akira nodded mutely, feeling a bit guilty for dragging the blond into this, even if Ryuji did have his own persona now.

“Let’s go then.” Sakamoto replied, rolling one of shoulders as he pushed himself away from the school gate. “Let’s take ‘em down!” He cheered, adopting a cocky grin; Akira couldn’t agree more, people like Kamoshida, ones who abused their power, deserved this. Even if what Morgana had told them had been wrong, it was better than not trying, right? And, as much as Akira hated to admit it, the older man had much more power and influence than he, himself, could account for. So going to the police, or even the principal, was a useless endeavor. Still, he couldn’t think of a backup plan in case trying to change Kamoshida’s heart didn’t work out. Putting all of his eggs in one basket was pretty risky, not to mention the danger of the Metaverse itself.

Still, they activated the Metaverse Navigator and were whisked into the blackened realm of Kamoshida’s heart and were instantly swathed in their alternate outfits, the sensation sending a menacing trickle down Akira’s spine.

They navigated through the elaborate hallways of Kamoshida’s castle, mostly keeping in the shadows and avoiding combat until they could finally meet up with Morgana. Even with the lack of magic and ringing steel, Akira’s heart was beating loudly in his ears. The threat of being caught at any moment was, in some manner, exhilarating. Though that feeling quickly dissolved in his stomach once they passed the library they’d discovered only yesterday. It might as well have been eons ago. The doors to the room were, fortunately, closed and Akira wasn’t ready to set foot inside of that space again. Instead, they traveled past it and into unknown territory. A left turn delivered a rather abrupt change in scenery, instead of another hallway, cramped with gaudy instruments and paintings of Kamoshida, Akira found himself, along with Sakamoto, upon a rather large, open room. It was, like the rest of the castle, dressed in marble, but with pews upon pews taking up most of the space, with all of them facing an infinitely large statue with an exact likeness to Kamoshida’s shadow.

It was, naturally, disturbing to both of them, with Akira frowning at the giant waste of stone and Ryuji sending a scowl in the things direction. In the blink of an eye, however, the entire layout of the room disappeared, replaced with the gym they’d spent the afternoon in. Suddenly, the implications were clear.

“In the gym… he views himself as a god.” Sakamoto voiced in such a way that Akira didn’t have to look towards the blond to identify his disgust. “That bastard makes me sick!”

Akira couldn’t help but sympathize.

“I see.” A voice emanated from somewhere, sounding nothing like Sakamoto or Morgana, or even Kamoshida, “So you’re the ones who tampered with the library?”

A hearty chuckle filtered through the air, “It seems my time waiting here has paid off…”

Akira’s skin prickles, and a compulsory sense has him jumping out of the way just as a giant spear crashes through the marble where he’d just been standing. Ryuji, shocked, stumbles backwards into one the pews.
“Wh-what the hell!” The blond screeches, scrambling backwards until they’re standing side by side.

“It is as you say, this place is a holy ground for our great king, Kamoshida.” The figure says, removing its spear from the ground with a quick jerk only to aim it in their direction, “It is preposterous for miscreants as yourselves to just come waltzing in here!”

The figure sheds its skin suddenly, revealing gleaming armor and vermillion wings, “You will pay for foolishly defying King Kamoshida!” The thing spouted before launching itself at Ryuji.

Akira wouldn’t be fast enough. The figure’s wings allowed it much faster speed than he, even with the additional speed his cognition provided, could manage. Ryuji, once again, was too stunned to be able to defend himself.

It seemed, once again, that this would be their end.

Until, that is, another voice rang out, defiant and strong-hearted.

“Zorro!” Within an instant, a gale penetrated through the thick fabric of his coat, and managed to send the creature spiraling across the room, its wings smashing into the stony form of Kamoshida.

The armor-encased shadow staggered upon hitting the solid surface, but managed to recover nevertheless, and instead of watching, Ryuji surged forward, calling forth his persona in a fit of lighting, sending blinding sparks through the room in a deadly beam.

Still, the monster failed to falter, and swept itself forward, sending the wicked curve of its spear towards Akira in a frantic arc. With the differences in their speed, even with the thing riddled in scorch marks, Akira still couldn’t dodge the attack, forcing him to tank the brunt of the impact with his curled arm, the only thing protecting his head from being impaled.

The spear was yanked backwards, tugging the new hole in his arm with it, sending a massive splash of crimson across the floor of Kamoshida’s monastery. Akira was glad, one of very few instances, that his vocal range was as limited as it was. For the sound that he would have made at feeling the tendons and ligaments within him being torn apart so simply, would have been a devastating one. Instead, his throat constricted, blocking the passage of oxygen into his lungs, at the same time his teeth clenched into a painful vice that made his jaw pulse in pain.

“Akira!” Ryuji screeched, though the noise was deafened by the sounding blood splashing out of his arm.

He couldn’t even feel it. His arm, that is.

How lucky... He realized grimly, observing the massive straight-through hole in his forearm once he jumped back, lining himself up with Morgana, further away from the shadow.

“Zorro!” Morgana yelled out once more, only instead of a rush of piercing wind, the persona appeared in front of him flicked his sword and disappeared once again. Akira watched, dumbfounded, as the see through hole in his arm began filling with flesh once again. The sensation was too disturbing for him to describe, and instead of forcing his distressed brain to do so, he gazed in the direction of their adversary and lifted his healing arm to force one of his personas into being.

With a rush of adrenaline, a flame burst forth from an extension of himself, enveloping the entire room in a sheet of flames.

Snap.
And another.

Snap.

And another.

The monster had been dead for several minutes before he finished purifying the room. It had only been the action of Ryuji grabbing onto him that he was able to stop his addled brain from continuing, and he was left kneeling on the floor, panting at wasting so much energy.

“Let me check out your arm, dude.” The blond said, tugging at his limp wrist as he began unraveling a roll of bandage from his pocket. He did not have the energy to fight back, and let the sleeve of his jacket be pushed forward, revealing the intact, albeit scarred, expanse of his forearm. Both of them stared at his skin in morbid fascination.

“Uh…” Ryuji eventually said, twisting his wrist around until the other side of his arm was within his line of sight, it too was equally scarred, yet healthy looking, minus the sprinkling of charcoal, but that was everywhere now, thanks to him.

“I thought he hit you here, I mean, you were bleeding a lot a second ago…”

“I healed it, of course!” The cat yowled, walking over to the two of them and crossing his appendages over his puffed out chest.

“You healed it? His arm?” Sakamoto questioned skeptically, despite the evidence that was, quite literally, in front of them.

Akira flexed his fingers, feeling, for the first time since he started his assault on Kamoshida’s minion, the stretch of his muscles as he moved them. It all felt normal, like his arm hadn’t just been stabbed through moments ago. A sickly sensation washed over him at that, how easily wounds were both created and mended within the Metaverse, so unlike the real world. The volleyball rally had been a prime example, with that kid’s face morphing into an explosion of purple from a ball, but unable to be healed instantly like his arm.

*Cognition*, he realized, *is a dangerous thing*…

“Of course!” Morgana said again, “My persona, much like myself, knows a lot of useful things!” With that, the cat laughed smugly, before reaching forward, and running an appendage over Akira’s exposed arm.

Akira shuddered.

Morgana’s fur was incredibly soft, very similar to a real cat.

“Didn’t realize those things could be so tough.” Ryuji mumbled, filling the silence while dropping Akira’s arm.

“Indeed,” Morgana replied, crossing his appendages, once again, over his chest, “It seems that Kamoshida is making a concerted effort into stopping us now…”

Ryuji said nothing in return, not even when the two of them stood and Morgana began following them, completing their trifecta once more.

“I gotta admit though,” Breaking the silence once more, “That fire thing was pretty cool!” The blond chirped as they surrounded the body of the beast they had just killed. It, unlike the other
shadows in Kamoshida’s castle, wasn’t swallowed up by the floor, nor did it turn to nothing, even after it had been burnt alive a dozen times. Aside from its continued presence, another thing drew Akira’s attention away from the cause he had caused, something gleaming within the blackened remains of the beast. Slowly, he bent down, mindful of the sharp edges of the shadow’s charred armor, and removed the shining object from its grasp.

“What is it, Akira?” Ryuji asked, scooting closer so he could look at Akira’s find as he spread out his crimson glove to reveal two small coins. “M-money!” His excitement was nearly palpable, the grin sequestering the revealed part of his face was just the cherry on top.

“It’s only six-hundred Yen though.” The blond pointed out, all excitement, even that of receiving free, well, nearly free, money completely withered.

“Isn’t that a lot, though?” Morgana asked, navy eyes fixated on the coins in Akira’s hands with a fascinated look; leaving him to wonder just how much Morgana knew about the human world, something he would predictably know if he was actually a human.

Ryuji snorted, “Guess money is money, right?” He stretched out, excitement returning once again, giving Akira the impression that he really didn’t know anything about Sakamoto, or his apparent mood swings.

Akira pocketed the money, feeling perplexed, beyond the scope of his companion.

Why did I lose control like that? He wondered, following Morgana and, subsequently, Ryuji through the territory the guard had been barring them from, completely on autopilot.

Even with the adrenaline, with his life being on the line, he had near perfect clarity when he’d awakened to his persona, as well as the other moments when all seemed lost. It seemed strange, still, that he’d lose himself in a battle where the odds were, seemingly, in their favor. His actions, simply put, were inexplicable, even to him. He’d never conjured magic that powerful before in any of their previous battles. Not that he wasn’t grateful for the barrier to be blasted into nothing but charred remains, but something about it, about him, left him concerned. He knew, as all things in the Metaverse were, that it had something to do with his cognition; a part of his own repressed cognition, perhaps? That seemed more likely, the entire castle they were currently exploring was an entire construct around repressed thoughts and feelings.

He didn’t have any more time to consider the past before the present caught up to him.

A large breeze caught in his coat, whisking the ends until they were flapping heavily in the wind. Akira gazed out, actually seeing what he was looking at for the first time in a long time. Somehow, they had made it outside, the red glow and darkened sky a dead giveaway. The wind that was brushing against his face was not one created by Morgana’s persona, or any of the shadows, but a byproduct of elevation, however, they hadn’t even reached the peak of Kamoshida’s castle, that end was towering in front of them, just across the heavily guarded terrace Morgana and Ryuji were scoping out, the two whispering back and forth while Akira stood there, staring like an idiot at the monolith before them. Kamoshida’s cognition was quite impressive, he had to admit, forming not only an entire castle, but a giant tower spiking out of it as well. Something told him that he wouldn’t be finding a princess at the top though, only a twisted man with a lot to lose.

“Joker!” Morgana whispered, his shrill voice cutting across the wind to penetrate his ears. “Lead the way!”

Akira stared back at the cat, blinking dumbly.
“What the hell?” Ryuji whispered too loudly, drawing the attention of a nearby shadow.

Carefully, the three of them slipped back towards the door.

“Did I say something?” Morgana inquired once the guard couldn’t locate them.


Nevertheless, Morgana bristled under the insult, “I am not a cat!” He yowled, furious, but unable cause harm or berate the blond lest more shadow show up on the already crowded roof.

“Besides, it’s his codename!” The cat refuted, lowering his voice and pointedly glaring at Ryuji. 

…What.

“Codename?” Sakamoto’s confused was etched into the visible lines on his face.

“Of course!” Morgana replied, making it sound incredibly obvious despite the fact that it was, very much so, not obvious. “If we use our real names inside the palace, who knows what the real Kamoshida will remember.”

“I thought you said he wouldn’t remember anything!” Ryuji accused, crouching down to his knees just so he could shove a gloved finger into Morgana’s chest.

“W-well,” The cat replied, hissing his words out as Ryuji continued to jab at his sternum, “It’s better safe than sorry, right?” He clarified uncertainly. Leaving Akira, and Ryuji judging by the blond’s face, skeptical whether Morgana was telling the truth or just being a hindrance.

“Fair enough… I guess; but why’s he Joker then?”

“Well,” Morgana began, a smug expression twisting his feline lips in a way Akira didn’t quite like, “He is our trump card! Just look at how many personas he can use.”

“Th-that’s your reason?” Ryuji questioned, skeptical.

“What other reason should there be? It’s just a codename…” The cat retorted, his fluffy tail puffing up as if Ryuji’s presence was sending static across his fur.

“What about me, then?” A smile crackled across Ryuji’s lips, seeming suddenly into the act of giving codenames.

“Uh-“ Morgana declared, staring between them with his giant pupils, “Skull?” The cat draw out, unsure.

Ryuji’s smile, somehow, grew wider, “I like it!” He cackled cheerfully.

“I suppose I’ll be needing one, too, even if Kamoshida doesn’t know me in the real world.” Morgana considered, tapping his chin with the end of his paw.

“How about Monamona…” The blond jeered, causing the cat to growl.

“Don’t be stupid, Skull… then again, I guess your Skull doesn’t have a brain in it!”
Akira tuned them out, thinking back to his own codename.

Joker... Was it mere irony that his codename was after the most useless card in a deck, or was it by design? Morgana, or apparently Monamona—shortened to Mona, didn’t seem like the spiteful sort, and even seemed to be quite fond of him. At least, more fond of him than, Sakamoto. Which, he supposed, that it wasn’t that hard of a decision when the blond took every opportunity to point out that Morgana was, in fact, a monster cat.

At least it’s not as cringe as Ace or something. All in all, Joker wasn’t that bad.

Still, that left a question unanswered, why he, the one who physically could not give orders, at least in a way that neither of his companions could understand.

Unfortunately, his question would have to wait until later, as, in that moment, one of the guards that had been patrolling the roof, finally noticed how much noise they were making and had finally found them.

In a panic, Joker set the collection of shadows ablaze, ignoring their cries for help from the nearby guards. It seemed, if anything, the guards scattered across the rooftops were ignoring their fellow shadow in favor of not running into the three of them. Which made Akira’s job as their impromptu leader an easy one.

With the danger of combat removed, it was simple enough to cross the moonlit terrace and end up at the other end. Unfortunately, the door to the tower was locked, though Akira supposed he should have expected as much, considering how many guards were currently strutting between the stone tiles of Kamoshida’s castle.

Still, they had to continue, and idea of scaling the nearby ledges came him quickly enough, resulting in a smug compliment from Morgana, the cat not even bothering to conceal his presence once he’d noticed that the guards had little to no interest in pursuing them. With the guards posing as little danger, the only thing they had to worry about was falling off, and due to his newfound agility, something Akira chalked up to nothing more than enhancements through cognition, the risk of plummeting was minimal as he was able to safely traverse across the stony topography of Kamoshida’s castle, all the way to the highest window they could reach without climbing straight up, something that would be impossible without a rope of some sort.

The atmosphere within the tower was an immediate and drastic shift from what was outside of it. Additionally, the decorating seemed to change drastically as well, switching out smooth marble flooring for platforms of shifting tiles that swam up and down without assistance. It was completely at odds from what they had seen so far. Additionally, similar to what lie outside of the castle, the candles seem to glow a reddish brown, casting the entire room in low, rusty light.

“The distortion is much worse here…” Morgana muttered, “The treasure must be nearby, then…”

“Treasure?” Sakamoto asked, causing the cat to flinch violently, as if only just realizing he had been speaking out loud.

“R-right... I suppose I should tell you about that.” Morgana tittered, raising a paw to scratch at the back of his giant head bashfully.

Akira moved further into the shadows of the room, and beckoned his two allies closer, while there weren’t any guards in the room, he wouldn’t be surprised if something like what happened on the terrace occurred again.
Once they were seated, with Morgana perched on the edge of one of the floating platforms, now taller than them once both him and Ryuji were off their feet.

“Remember how I said that we would have to destroy Kamoshida’s shadow if you wanted to change his heart.” Akira nodded, changing the coach’s heart had been his entire inspiration for returning to his place, aside from the dreams he’d had. Beside him, Sakamoto also nodded, quiet for once as he watched the cat skeptically.

“Well, that’s not the entire process,” He cleared out his throat before continuing, “When a person gets distorted desires, it manifests within the Metaverse, physically. However, the desire itself is the reason why this place exists, so, we have to steal Kamoshida’s actual distorted desire, the treasure, out of the metaverse. Does… that make sense?”

Like thieves… The way Morgana used the words treasure and steal made him think back to what Igor had said, what the memories of other tricksters informed him of. To steal Kamoshida’s sickness from his heart, could he just do that? According to Morgana, yes; according to his own moral boundaries, probably not. It seemed wrong, to just allow Kamoshida to change. Change came with time, not with thievery.

“You seem conflicted, Joker.” Monamona noted, leaping off the levitating platform so they were eyelevel.

Akira shrugged, but dug out his phone for the first time since they arrived.

Kamoshida will be a good person after we steal his desires, won’t he?

Morgana nodded.

Would he forget what he did, to Suzui and the others? Even typing her name made guilty shivers travel up his arms.

The cat faltered, “…I didn’t want to say anything until we found the treasure but, there is a chance that Kamoshida won’t remember anything, if we steal his desires.”

Audibly, Sakamoto gulped, “What do you mean anything?” He snapped.

Morgana’s blue eyes crinkled in awkwardness, “We’re stealing, or planning to steal, his desires, all of them. Desire to eat, to sleep, to love; he’d become a shell of a person, and… if someone didn’t take care of him, he could die.”

“So we’d be killin him?” The blond screeched, his words reverberating around the empty room.

Morgana winced, his ears folding down over his large head in the biggest sign of emotion that Akira had seen from him yet.

“It’s possible, that when we steal his treasure all of his desires disappear, if the distortion surrounding his distortions in strong enough…”

Akira studied the ground, trying to accept this. Kamoshida’s castle was the only example of manifested desires, and the castle looked quite expansive due to distortion, it seemed quite likely that if they stole Kamoshida’s treasure, the man would die.

“I-it’s better than doing nothing, right?” Morgana insisted. “Joker?”

Akira looked up finally, and his thoughts must have made their way onto his face, as Morgana’s
expression only worsened.

**Assuming he doesn’t die, would he remember?** He wanted an answer before he made any conclusions. Turning Kamoshida into a good person suddenly would look suspicious, especially with the apparent rumors floating around about him and Sakamoto doing something to Kamoshida.

“He’d remember all of the crimes he committed, yes, and in the absence of his distorted desires, he’d be compelled to confess them.”

*Good.* Akira, grim as it was, wanted Kamoshida to suffer for what he had done. Those pictures of that girl, bruised so much that Akira couldn’t even recognize her when they were face to face was enough to cement his conviction.

He turned to Sakamoto, and studied the final piece of their team, the one who had been hurt the most by Kamoshida out of all of them. He’d leave the final decision to Ryuji, even if it meant that they abandoned the palace and forgot it, along with Morgana, ever existed.

*Skull* sat for a long moment, the thoughtful deliberation in his brown eyes, heavy accentuated by the steeliness of the mask covering his face, made a pit drop in Akira’s stomach. He really hoped that his companion wouldn’t force them to abandon the progress that they had made, even if Kamoshida ended up dead. Things at Shujin couldn’t continue as they were, even Akira, who hadn’t even been there for an entire week, could see that.

Kamoshida was a cancer upon the school.

“Allright.” Sakamoto said eventually, filling him with relief. “We just gotta steal the treasure thing, and beat him up?”

Morgana nodded, but judging from the twitching of his ears, Akira had a feeling things would be as simple as Sakamoto summed them up.

**Chapter End Notes**

Feel free to add me on Snapchat or Tumblr if you guys are ever wondering how I’m
doing or why there's a late update or something. As always, leave a review if there's something you want added to the story or if you see a typo or something.
They found the treasure that afternoon, despite their exhaustion. Out of the three of them, Morgana was the most shocked at that; despite the increase in the distortions present in Kamoshida’s castle, the cat had assumed they would have a larger stretch to cover before they would manage to find the floating grey blob, which Morgana assured them was the treasure, within the very last room of Kamoshida’s castle. Akira was shocked too, only about the shape the treasure had taken, but he supposed that anything could happen within a world made of cognition.

The Metaverse, however, had one glaring flaw. One that Akira wish they’d known before traversing through the palace. He doubted that it would change his mind though.

The three of them, technically the two of them, would have to interact with Kamoshida in the real world in such a way that the treasure would materialize within Kamoshida’s heart.

Morgana’s recommended method was in the form of a calling card. One that they would post all over their school. The shock, Morgana theorized, would be enough to cause Kamoshida’s treasure to become less blob-like.

He was really starting to hate that word.

Still, that left one thing they couldn’t entirely account for.

Dealing with Kamoshida’s shadow.

They hadn’t seen hide nor hair of the panty-wearing being since their last encounter. The guards, in between begging for their lives, hadn’t mentioned seeing their fabulous king either. That was enough to cause even more anxiety to be stressed on the situation. How were they supposed to gather a weakness or method of neutralizing the shadow if they never saw it; and they couldn’t spy on the real Kamoshida for an answer, as that would raise suspicion unnecessarily before they, or Sakamoto rather, posted the calling card.

All in all, Akira was nothing if not a nervous mess, not that he could show it.

Not in Shujin.

Not in front of Sakura-sen.

Morgana, though, seemed to see right through him, an unfortunate side effect of no longer having a mask covering a large portion of his face.

“Joker,” The cat whined, interrupting his thought process by stepping directly on his neck, “Stop worrying about it, I’m your mentor, remember? We can take down this palace easily if you stay with me!” He announced loudly, a cheeky grin spreading between his whiskers, or Akira assumed it was something to that effect, Morgana’s form in the real world was much less anthropomorphic than his Metaverse self.

He pressed his fingers to his lips, urging, not for the first time, that the feline lower his volume.

Even though the cat had said that people who’d never been in the Metaverse could hear him, it was better safe than sorry, especially since he had sneaked the cat through LeBlanc without asking
Sakura-san if that was okay.

He had a feeling that having an animal in a restaurant was going to be a no from the older man, even if that restaurant only served curry. Worst case scenario: he was evicted for being too much trouble. So, keeping the cat a secret would be the best option, and that meant keeping his feline companion quiet. Which was becoming more and more difficult the more time passed. Morgana, despite the persona he presents, not Zorro, he was quite the antsy brat when it came to sitting still.

He didn’t know what to do with a cat, especially not one with human-level intelligence and could talk. He had a feeling a mouse on a string wouldn’t suffice.

The afternoon drifted quickly into evening, it was mere blind luck that Akira, and Morgana he supposed, had exited the Metaverse before Café LeBlanc closed, otherwise they, or just him rather, would have been reprimanded, which would, no doubt, lead to Morgana being discovered. And soon enough, the muffled musings of Sojiro’s customer base dwindled into nothingness. And, not soon after the bell on the café’s door jingled for the last time, was Sakura-san mounting the creaking stairs to LeBlanc’s attic.

Which meant…

“Hide, hide, hide!” He signed consecutively, each more frantic than the last. He couldn’t help momentarily losing himself in the blind panic that coursed through his bloodstream as he heard Sakura-san getting closer and closer to the landing. It only occurred to him when he heard Sakura-san’s grumbling from the stairs that Morgana didn’t actually know sign language.

The cat stared at him, his blue pupils wide and the confusion apparent on his less expressive face. Something he would marvel at that later!

He threw the cat, the actual cat, under the blanket on the bed and quickly balled it up before throwing it back down.

Morgana, thankfully, stayed silent.

“Yo.” Sakura-san said, nearly giving him a heart attack.

Akira turned around, hoping he didn’t look as frazzled as he felt, it took time to put his mask into place! Uncertain, he raised a hand in greeting.

Sakura-san hummed, a thick rumbling that only years of smoking could produce.

He glanced up, just long enough to catch a glimpse of the older man’s gaze, which was, to his complete misfortune, narrowed on the now wiggling ball of fabric on his bed.

Seriously… His mind supplied, though his annoyance was cut short as Sakura-san took a step forward. Akira, cautious as ever, took a step back. However, there wasn’t much space from where he had been standing and the frame of the bed, which produced a metallic hum as his leg collided with it. He paid it no mind, his heart making enough noise within his ears to deafen him.

Akira felt his entire body tense up as Sakura-san grew closer and closer.

The slow motions of the middle-aged man was enough to set him off, a massive anticipatory flinch threw his body back onto the bed. Fortunately, Sakura-san wasn’t looking at him, otherwise he might have ended up breaking down further. Somehow, wordlessly, the man exuded an aura that reminded him of things he didn’t want to remember, though they were only days ago.
Sakura-san cast the duvet aside, revealing Morgana, who stood up and presented himself proudly to the newcomer.

His stomach plummeted, sweat already drowning between his clenched fingers.

Akira’s mind produced a loud humming noise, an endless crackle of anxiety and fear. The look in Sakura-san’s eyes said it all.

“I was wondering why I heard meowing!” The man shouted, Akira flinched again, his chin tucking pitifully towards his neck, carefully avoiding the older man’s gaze, “What did you bring it here for?”

The force behind Sakura-san’s voice melted the next time he spoke, “Then again… I guess you might stay on good behavior if you had a pet to take care of.”

It picked back up again. “Still!” Akira could feel his glare and didn’t need to look up from the floor, “This is a restaurant! Animals are a no-go. How could you be so idiotic?”

Against his will, his vision turned foggy, his resolve exhausted from a day in the cognitive world, and, soon enough, warm blobs of liquid emotions were trailing down his cheeks. He was too exhausted to wipe them away, and instead, sat there, crying like a child after Sakura-san had merely raised his voice at him.

The physical strikes never came, like he’d expected them to.

“Fine.” Sakura-san sighed, “You can keep it, but don’t keep it quiet during business hours. And don’t let it down into the kitchen, or I’ll have to throw it out.”

Despite having received no punishment, Akira was still unable to stop himself from crying. He was, despite what Morgana prattled in the Metaverse, a weakling. Surely this, if anything, would ruin the impression the cat had made of him.

He couldn’t manage to look towards his now official roommate. His fuzzy gaze locked onto the floor and refused to look away.

“Is that the ruler of this place?” Morgana asked once Sakura-san’s figure melted down the stairs.

Akira nodded shortly.

“He seemed pretty understanding for someone who keeps you cramped in this dump…” Akira didn’t have a response. His life was a dump, more so than LeBlanc’s attic, what did it matter besides having a place to sleep.

Akira sat there, rather shocked that it had went that smoothly, nothing ever went that smoothly!

His heartrate took an unexpected spike, however, when he noticed Sakura-san ascending the stairs once again.

This was it. The sinking in his stomach from Morgana’s reveal was now fluxed with pain, his insides cramping with his instincts telling him to hide.

Hiding would be useless, though.

Sakura-san could already see him.

The older man approached slowly, and Akira cringed, wishing that it would just be over with
already.

Suddenly, a weight was pushed into his lap and he wondered when he’d managed to seal his eyes shut.

“Don’t expect this kind of treatment every day, alright? This isn’t a hotel.” Sakura-san said from right beside him.

_H-hotel?_ His mind sputtered, working into overdrive in sightless confusion.

The black canvas behind his eyelids was sliced in half with reluctance. With his eyes open, Akira was easily able to identify the weight that had been placed in his laps.

It wasn’t a belt, not had it been Morgana, pouncing into his lap in fear.

Just because the gift didn’t have the potential to harm him, unless Sakura-san managed to get creative, didn’t mean it made him any less uncomfortable.

In his lap, currently warming a hole through his thighs, was a plate of LeBlanc’s curry.

His stomach lurched forebodingly, and if he weren’t already caked in sweat from head to toe from Sakura-san’s earlier appearance, it would be doing so now.

Akira glanced up at his caretaker.

Fortunately, Sakura-san’s gaze was not on him, and instead gazing dotingly upon Morgana, as he lapped at a large saucer of milk.

“Make sure to clean those dishes, by the way.” The older man muttered, still staring, unblinking, at Morgana. The cat seemed to croon under the attention, as small feline chuckles warbled through its open mouth as it continued drinking.

Akira nodded.

His brain was fried.

“So, have you—“ Sakura-san cleared his throat, “Have you decided on a name?” Technically, he had not, Morgana had exposed his own name, and Sakamoto had chosen the cat’s code name. He shook his head slightly, his neck still stiff from fearing for his future.

Sakura-san, as if his answer had flipped a switch, chuckled giddily, a massive, crooked smirk scrunching up the skin around his mouth. He looked like a completely different person, an alternate version of the glaring, scowling Sakura-san he had come to know in the past few days.

Morgana’s preening ended, and the cat was eyeing their caretaker in thinly concealed suspicion.

“Kaito.” Sakura-san said simply, looking quite pleased with himself as he crossed his arms over his apron-clad chest.

... _Ocean?_

The name, most likely, spawned from Morgana’s massive blue eyes, which were currently shifting between the two humans in the room, and glaring menacingly.

“I think he likes that…” Sakura-san mused, lowering a hand to rub between Morgana’s ears.
Immediately, the cat protested, affronted at the prospect of being pet, “H-hey! Stop—oh!” The feline all but purred out his final syllable. Akira watched as his companion strained his neck forward, urging more and more of his black fur under Sakura-san’s hand.

It was almost alarming, how quickly the atmosphere in the room had shifted. Between him thinking it was going to be like back home, only to find his menacing looking caretaker smiling and cooing down at the sword-wielding cat.

He hoped it wasn’t too selfish of him to continue keeping Morgana around. Though Sakamoto didn’t seem too fond of their mentor, so that was one less opinion to worry about, and if alleviated the awkward tension of LeBlanc’s atmosphere, he’d gladly keep the feline fed and washed.

Morgana frowned when the ministrations finally ended, the cat whined in protest, much to Sakura-san’s amusement.

“Loud one, aren’t you?” The older man teased.

Morgana pursued the fleeting hand with surprising bubbliness, or surprising to Akira at least, “Down, kitty!” His caretaker shouted, but there was no force behind it, not like when that voice was directed at him.

“A-anyway,” Sakura-san said, sobering up almost instantly as he gazed down at Akira, “Make sure to clean those plates and lock up. Got it?” Akira nodded.

Once Sakura-san left, Akira set about doing his assigned tasks, ignoring the numbness from exhaustion that was threatening to collapse all of his limbs.

“Looks like the chief likes me more than he likes you.” Morgana stated proudly, lining his body against the large sink LeBlanc had to offer, directly opposing the rules that Sakura-san had placed not moments ago.

Akira cringed, but didn’t have a way to communicate with the cat while his hands were soaking wet.

“Still, I guess I’ll have to thank you for taking in me in.” Morgana continued, flicking his tail over the counter, even more forbidden territory. “It’s probably much better here than at Ryuji’s, even with the mess upstairs.”

He shrugged, he didn’t know much about Sakamoto, and what he did know was not information about his living space.

“So, thanks.” Morgana put out awkwardly.

Again, Akira shrugged. He’d have to come up with a better way at communicating with the cat, besides his minimal gestures. Flipping his phone out during a palace, even in rooms with low distortion, could result in rather unfortunate circumstances.

He wondered if he’d be the first person to teach a cat sign language.

To call Morgana just a cat though…

Doing the dishes had been the most time consuming part of what he’d been assigned, in addition to the two plates that Sakura-san had given them, Akira’s untouched while Morgana’s was wiped clean, the sink was also full of similar looking plates and a small mountain of coffee cups.
Cleaning them all left his hands pleasantly warm and more than a little pruned.

Morgana followed him around the café while he did his chores, much to Akira’s chagrin. Had Morgana not listened to a word Sakura-san had said? Surely not, otherwise the feline wouldn’t be strutting around the café like he owned the place.

Still, he had to admit, though he knew very little about his own aesthetics, that Morgana’s form in the real world was very soft looking and a lot less hard on the eyes than his Metaverse counterpart.

Finally, after nearly an hour after Sakura-san had left them, or him rather, to clean up the café, was he finally able to turn LeBlanc’s lights off and return to the café’s attic.

His phone was blinking brightly when he climbed into bed.

“Yo! I finished the calling card, but I’m exhausted, so night, dude!” Sakamoto told him.

Morgana glanced at the device in his hands.

“You two can communicate with these things, huh?” The cat asked, despite having seen its effects twice now.

Akira nodded, preparing his own text message to reply to Sakamoto.

“I’ll definitely need in on this,” The cat appealed, “But… I don’t really have fingers, so you’ll have to do it for me!”

Akira shrugged one shoulder, the other one buried under his torso and part of his pillow.

“Tell Ryuji I say ‘Hello Ryuji’!” The cat commanded.

“Good work. Morgana says Hello Ryuji.” Send.

Sakamoto didn’t reply.

Akira cradled himself further into his blanket, attempting to tune out Morgana’s whining at their lack of reply until he finally lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! This chapter is much shorter than the others because I'm leaving for a forced vacation for the next week. If I had been a better time-manager-person, I could have given a full length chapter, but I'm not, so this is all you're getting until after the 20th of July 2018. I apologize. As always, please leave a review if you have a suggestion or comment; I love reading all of them.

My own comment: I ffffffffffffffffffffffffhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhfeel like Morgana could be made to hate Ryuji much less, at least in the beginning, if Ann is introduced a little later. Sorry for all the Ann lovers out there. So that's where I'm going with this. She will be
introduced, obviously, just a little later than she is in canon.
Akira didn’t dream of the Velvet Room that night. He’s not sure what he chalked it up to, though; the warmth Morgana was providing in the cool evenings of spring or the panic that had wafted slowly into nothingness as he cleaned LeBlanc, the aromatic fragrance of coffee lulling him into exhaustion. He wasn’t entirely sure which it could be, or if there was an unseen other factor that he hadn’t considered. He wasn’t exactly a coffee fanatic, nor did he own any pets back home, but both felt nice. However, Sakura-san’s tirade in tandem with the intense smell of coffee had caused an unsettling rumble under his skin He writhed in bed for an additional moment, the alarm for school already turned off. His stomach continued to rumble in mutinous protest.

Morgana insisted on joining him to school.

The additional weight was rather pronounced, causing his shoulder to sag dramatically to one side as he all but dragged his schoolbag out of the café. Morgana had felt much lighter the day before. Still, they made it to the train station on time, sliding past the doors just before they curtained shut. Morgana poked his head out of the bag, taking in the atmosphere of the death-tube. The cat didn’t seem to share his unease; which Akira supposed was a slight blessing. He was not fond of the idea of walking around with cat vomit in his bag.

The vibrating of his pocket distracted him from observing Morgana’s twitching ears.

It was Sakomoto.

“Sorry I was sleeping.”

Another Vibration.

“When should we send the calling—“

A pearly paw cut off the remainder of Sakomoto’s message, forcing his wrist into tilting towards a pair of observant blue eyes. Morgana murmured along with Sakomoto’s words, reading them aloud and causing a slight dissonance in the area around them, bystanders gazing around in attempt to find a source of the ghostly meowing.

Akira yanked his schoolbag upwards, pulling it further up on his shoulder and causing Morgana to jump enough that the cat went silent after a short yelp.

The murmuring died down, both from the cat and the people towering around them.

Morgana waited until they were on the platform before he finally spoke again.

“The sooner the better!” The cat advised, twisting his neck until they made eye contact.

Akira was inclined to agree, but couldn’t fully support the idea. The guilty itch in the back of his head reminded him why.

There’s a chance that we kill Kamoshida if we do this...

The thought made his rumbling stomach revolt painfully. Even if Morgana assured them that they
wouldn’t be caught, Akira wasn’t sure if he could live with himself knowing that he had actually took a life, even one as twisted as Kamoshida’s.

He needed to think!

_The abuse won’t wait._ That realization only made him feel worse, even as it strengthened his resolve. Who knows when Kamoshida might finally snap and act on his demented desires, if he hasn’t already. Akira thinks of that room, hidden in Kamoshida’s library, the same library that displays all of his _conquests_ so shamelessly.

What makes Suzui so different? Why did Kamoshida keep her behind a hidden door when there was actual _books_ dedicated to the lives he had ruined since coming to Shujin? He had a feeling the answer would only make him feel worse.

_“Saturday”_ He responded, typing out without thinking.

He wanted this to be over, he wanted to have the chance to be a normal student. He didn’t want to walk around school with these feelings of dread, not knowing what was happening behind closed doors or within the endless expanse of the school’s gymnasium, but aware enough that they were _evil_. He couldn’t continue being in the same building as Suzui, knowing there was something that he could have done to ease her suffering.

If taking down Kamoshida’s shadow was the way to do that… he would do it without hesitation!

Arsene, from deep within his being, hummed in welcome.

_“Let the show begin!”_ His Persona shouted from between his ears, cackling maniacally as Akira made his way towards the school gates.

_“Got it, Joker.”_ Akira snorted at the nickname.

Somehow, in comparison to the _heist_ they were planning, something as exhilarating as being ignored, but also gossiped about, as well as being glared at while the teachers gave their lectures made for a rather dull backdrop to his thoughts.

They were going to do this!

School ended with a promise to meet up in the alley where they had first seen Kamoshida’s castle, much further away from the prying eyes of Shujin’s student population, namely Takamaki.

Sakomoto activated the Metaverse Navigator as soon as they hit the far edge of the cramped walkway, whisking them into the darkened realm of Kamoshida’s heart.

Their clothes, unlike the two previous times they had been there, shifted as soon as they reached the perimeter of Kamoshida’s domain. Morgana shifted too, the schoolbag he’d been in previously fizzling into nothing as his feline skull swelled into its normal shape.

_Skull_ watched, transfixed and seemingly disgusted, judging by the sneer impressed on the visible parts of his face. Akira tried to mellow his own reaction, lest their mentor gets annoyed with them and decides that their team isn’t worth the ridicule.

_“W-what?”_ The cat finally squeaks out, tilting his rotund head to the side as he observes Sakomoto.

The blond glances elsewhere, scratching at his yellow hair with an equally yellow glove,
“Nothing!” He says all too quickly.

Morgana looks skeptical, but turns to him instead, looking confounded. From behind the cat, Skull smirks.

Akira shrugs, then gestures towards the foreboding form of Kamoshida’s desires turned solid. The castle’s form was still the same ominous structure it had always been, yet Akira felt more comfortable traversing its depths than he had a few days ago—even a day ago. Not that the lust-emblazoned corridors could ever make him feel anything but disgust and anguish, but he was managing.

His adaptation, however, was not an infallible force.

The objective in coming here today was to strengthen their personas as well as their teamwork; which sounded much more professional than Sakomoto’s text of “Kick ass and find Kamoshida!”

Akira’s legs collapse before they even manage to get halfway through the main formation of the castle, the cathedral where he’d scorched Kamoshida’s godly form was only a few doors down when he found himself inhaling the coarse fabric of a hallway rug. The scent was nothing special, yet managed to splash bursts of black across his vision.

“Akira!” Skull all but screamed from a few steps behind him, not close enough to catch him but well enough in proximity to hear the loud thud produced by his nose slamming into the padded, yet still solid, flooring.

“Joker!” Morgana yelped, right before the sensation of being pressed on passed through his senses. He was rolled over, allowing most of the ceiling to creep into his vision. The light made his stomach twist, like he was being squeezed from the inside with hands made of iron.

“A-are you alright?” Morgana asked, paws still painfully into his sides.

Dazed, Akira nodded.

“Did you wear yourself out or something?” Skull inquired suddenly, making him finally take notice of the gleaming face stooped over his own. Sakomoto’s eyes were widened, the whites wrapping around the rims of his eyeholes, his face, even while covered in metal, was configured into deep, shadowed valleys.

Morgana’s face was no better. The already pitch black fur that covered most of his face turned an even more intense shade of midnight, his normally oceanic eyes squinted in confusion and shock.

He hadn’t meant to worry them…

That was his last clear thought before everything faded to black.

When his brain finally restarted, the air was no longer thick yet cold, the smell of ashes was replaced with garbage, and no screams bounced off the walls around them.

They had returned from the real world.

What happened? He wondered in between the pounding in his skull.

“Ryuji! He’s waking up!” Morgana called from beside him, initiating the sound of stomping.

“Dude!” Sakomoto gasped, breathing hard over his face.
His stomach churned at the smell.

“I-I got you some water,” Something pressed at his lips, “Morgana thought you might have been dehydrated from running around in the Metaverse…”

Icy liquid slipped past his lips and across his tongue, causing the flaming muscles within his throat to ripple, attempting to repel the liquid. His body was too lethargic to fight it, though, or to keep his eyes open. Ryuji continued to tilt the container upwards, forcing his jaw to follow along idly as water slid into the depths of his stomach. It continued to churn uneasily, but he didn’t vomit.

Eventually, his lips were met with nothing but moist air and the bottle was removed shortly after. Something clunked against his head, presumably the bottle.

He rubbed at his head, but only felt his hair and the sturdiness of his scalp past the fog occupying his mental facilities.

“Idiot.” Sakomoto scoffed.

“I have to agree, Joker,” Morgana interjected, “If there were any shadows around, we would have been in serious trouble.”

His head lulled forward on its own accord.

“Sorry.” The sign comes out before he can fight it, another byproduct of his half-conscious mind.

“Uh.” Ryuji replied.

Akira opened his eyes.

Morgana was staring at him intensely. His emotions, as ever, were plain to see despite the blackened affect of his fur. Disappointment reflected back onto him in somber shades of blue. His stomach twisted.

“What happened back there?” Sakomoto questioned. Akira’s eyes were drawn towards the sound of his teammate’s voice. Without the shapely metal that quelled the expression on the blond’s face to a minimum, Sakomoto’s expression was significantly sourer than it had been before he had passed out.

The bottle connected with his head once again.

“You should have said something, idiot!” The blond shouted.

Akira watched him recoil at his own words, “Or…er, typed something, I mean—“

His lips cringed into a small grin before he found the nimbleness to reach into his pocket.

“Sorry. I did not mean to worry you two.”

Sakomoto didn’t seem satisfied with his apology, as the bottle struck him a third time.

“I—Don’t worry about… worrying me, or whatever.” The blond sighed deeply, the lines that had scrunched his face up smoothing out into a more placating, pitying expression. When Sakomoto met gazes with him again, something in his eyes had noticeably changed.

“I can’t let anyone fall victim to that bastard again!” The words were punctuated with a winding
back of Sakomoto’s arm. On instinct, his body curled into itself, ducking down to avoid anything too painful.

The blow never landed.

Instead, in the distance, the empty bottle clattered noisily between the alley’s walls and eventually found itself on the floor.

His mind rejected his will to open his eyes, but when he finally did, Sakmato was staring at him. The blond’s face artfully blank, despite the puffing his nose and chest were performing.

“I’ll see ya tomorrow.” He huffed out, taking to his legs and towering over him for the briefest of moments before he whisked himself around the corner.

Akira found it difficult to head back to LeBlanc.

In the past few days, he’d yet to arrive before closing.

The exhaustion drove him towards Yongen-Jaya before his awkwardness could repel him from the train station.

The walk from the station back to the café was longer than it usually was, even with the new addition of weight pocketed under his shoulder. Keeping his head down, he observed, not for the first time, the decrepit and weathered streets leading to LeBlanc. The homely feel was endlessly fascinating, yet completely boring, still, the distraction didn’t last long enough before he was pushing open the door to the café.

“Welcome—oh.” Was the reception he received upon entering; Sakura-san clearly hadn’t anticipated him returning at a decent hour.

The older man flicked the book in his hand towards the stairs, “The store’s still open, go upstairs.” The instructions replaced a greeting once his identity had been revealed. Somehow, he’d expected as such, despite Sakura-san’s kindness from the night before, which only served to make him even more confused on how he should act around the café owner.

Akira nodded and tucked his schoolbag closer to his side, making sure Morgana was well hidden from both customer and proprietor before he ambled forward. He made it several steps before an obstacle slid in front of him like a slamming door.

“O-oh, my mistake.” The human-shaped obstacle called out, a dry voice that, even through the filter of shock, he could recognize without fail.

His chest, shoulders, and neck seized up instantly, but somehow, he flicked his eyes upward to confirm it.

Shit.

Bronze eyes, surrounded in dark, dark makeup, leveled onto him with focus that only a doctor could achieve. The stark white coat was absent though, replaced with casual, gothic clothing; it did nothing to distract him from the gleam in her eyes, the floor, however, was a decent deterrent from the feeling of being intensely analyzed.


Akira chances a look up, but is unable to peer further than the sneer pinching her lips together.
“H-hey!” Sakura-san shouts, interrupting his imminent, albeit silent, meltdown, “Stop harassing the customers!”

He takes a step backwards, trying to make himself as small as possible in the small walkway. Her eyes, like a predator’s, tracked him. He could feel her gaze. Knowing, yet the social contract kept her from leaping on him again and battering him with unanswerable questions.

“I don’t mind.” The doctor replies, just as loudly, but lacking the gruff irritation that seeps off of Sakura-san whenever he’s around.

“Er, still—” Another gaze presses down on him, begging him to squish open like a bug, “He should at least apologize.”

Before she can protest, and before his body can muster up more concrete to freeze his body with, Akira finds himself bowing deeply before the physician he doesn’t know the name of.

He’s not embarrassed by the action, no more than usual anyway.

“Now go upstairs.” Sakura-san sighs out.

Again, Akira follows the instructions with little hesitation.

“Sorry about that, doctor.” Another sigh.

He doesn’t hear the reply, only the muffled vibrations of her voice as he stumbles onto the landing of the attic.

Morgana bursts free as soon as he puts down the bag, small, puffy paws extending, followed by a small, bulbous head. His sleek form sparks up a buff of dust upon landing, causing the graceful landing to turn into a miniature coughing fit.

Gently, he patted along the feline’s spine, trying to fix the issue.

He couldn’t go downstairs for water, unfortunately, and he hadn’t had time to set up Morgana with a bowl beforehand; something he was currently regretting as his teammate began retching at increasing volumes. Each cough and lurch of his throat grew in intensity with each moment until, right between his feet, Morgana puked up a very round, very slimy ball of hair. Disturbing.

“Disgusting!” Morgana rasped out, yet leaned forward to sniff at the abomination that had spawned on the floor.

Akira cringed, but made no effort to move away from the object or to clean it up. It was kind of fascinating, sort of, in a very, very strange way. It only served to remind him of his own stomach, which had long since turned into a heavy pressure pushing further and further down. He had to pee.

Unfortunately, according to the sun, which was still filtering through the far window in broad beams, the café would be open for quite a while. Which meant he couldn’t go downstairs.

Morgana’s hairball only distracted him for so long before he found it more disturbing than interesting. Digging into his bag, he pulled out a piece of scrap paper and wedged it beneath the moist clump and balled it up. The cat remained silent, yet seemed rather put out at the loss of his hairball.

Homework provided nothing but sore eyes, an insufficient distraction that he managed in an hour. In that hour, LeBlanc refused to close.
He’d given up on the café ever closing when something finally happened.

“You feeling better?” Sakomoto questioned, causing a loud ping! to interrupt the silence in the attic as well as the boredom and exhaustion that was starting to creep in. He almost wanted to go to bed more than he wanted to relieve himself. Almost.

He stretched out across the thin mattress in the attic’s corner, swathing himself in an equally thin cocoon of blankets, and contemplated his reply.

The most straightforward answer was a resounding yes. He was no longer unconscious in Kamoshida’s palace, or subsequently in an alley behind Shujin, and while he had to pee very, very badly, and he was still mortified at his chance encounter with the doctor from the bathhouse, those things were improvements from passing out.

His stomach grumbled.

“Yes. Sorry again for trouble.” He eventually sent, after rolling over multiple times, much to Morgana’s dismay.

The reply was near instant.

“Anyways, we still on for Saturday for the calling card thing?”

Akira considered it. While they had made some progress in growing their strength, having to end the day earlier put a slight damper on their progress. They didn’t have a lot of information on Kamoshida’s abilities, outside of being a manipulative abuser and an Olympic medalist. If the three of them approached, could they really take down someone as worshipped and feared as Kamoshida?

We don’t have a choice… He reasoned, but found it flawed; he knew it was wrong. To do nothing when many others were suffering. Even if he, Sakomoto or Morgana were hurt, even if Kamoshida died as a result of his treasure being stolen, wasn’t that a better fate than doing nothing? Igor seemed to think so, though he didn’t know enough about the man to discern his true intentions.

They could kill this man. A teacher he barely knew, gone like a whisper; broken irreparably, a husk of a man with no desires.

Could Sakomoto live with that? Could I live with that? He wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like it had been all those weeks ago. There wasn’t time to plan or to think, he could only move. He’d been punished for moving, rejected by his parents, and by society.

Could he really do the same thing again?

“Are you talking with Ryuji?” Morgana’s voice crackled through suddenly, causing his body to seize up in momentary panic. When had the cat gotten so close?

He finally allowed himself to see the screen before him, which had long since faded to black due to his inactivity.

He turned back to Morgana, nodding.

The cat purred softly, “About our mission? I can tell by the look on your face.”

Then why did he ask… Then again, Morgana did have a strange air about him, one that, just by a look, you could tell he did not have a filter between whatever spawned in his mind and what came
out of his mouth; especially when it came to Sakomoto. He wondered if there was a similar
situation with his stomach and mouth.

_Most likely._ Akira snorted.

“Joker,” Morgana stepped closer, kneeling down so their faces didn’t collide, save for the
whispering of fur against his chin. His face was hidden from view, giving Akira a decent view of
Morgana’s staggering breathing.

“Are you having doubts about our mission?”

Stupid, perceptive cat.

Fortunately, with Morgana’s face bundled beneath him, his teammate couldn’t see what was,
apparently, an obvious expression of uncertainty. The cat remained silent, though his mind, for
once, didn’t stream out of his mouth; not a good sign.

“Can I tell you something?” Morgana asked. His breathing had slowed, but his fur covered spine
remained completely rigid.

He unlocked his phone.

_“Sure.”_

The cat sighed deeply, deflating his form until it was near melted into the mattress.

“Remember when Ryuji asked about what I am?” Akira recalled Sakomoto deeming Morgana a
_monster cat_, but not the blond posing a question of what exactly Morgana was.

 “…To be honest, I don’t remember anything about my birth,” Another sigh, “I think the
Metaverse’s distortions made me lose both my memory and my true form; but I’m sure, once
they’re purged, I’ll remember who I am, and regain my identity.”

It was his turn to sigh.

Morgana had been fairly straightforward with his desires, to reclaim his human form; not to help
others. His stomach recoiled. Obviously he wouldn’t care if Kamoshida died. He wondered if the
cat could even feel remorse, could fully process what it meant to take a life outside of the
Metaverse.

_Still, it’s not like he’ll give up…_ Morgana seemed driven, if nothing else, pushing them to their
limits to achieve their, and his own separate, goal.

He could still call of the mission. Could easily text Sakomoto and explain that it felt wrong to
chance someone’s life like they were planning to do.

He couldn’t.

“How about this, I’ll become your _pet_ as the boss called it, in exchange for your help in the
Metaverse.” Another deal. “In addition, due to my vast knowledge and dexterous nature, I’ll teach
you some other skills to help in that world.”

_So… two burdens and more lessons._ Morgana was possibly the worst salesman he’d ever met.

“How does that sound?” Morgana quipped, sounding quite confident. The cat twisted around once
more, taking some distance so he could observe him.
Akira wanted to say no, but his neck refused to accept that notion. Instead, he stared back at the cat, into those enormous, reflective blue eyes. He didn’t like what he saw inside, nor did he enjoy the grin threatening to split the cat’s face.

He agreed to the deal with a swift, cordial nod.

Morgana’s intentions were not pure, nor were they self-righteous.

Nor were Sakomoto’s, the blond wanted revenge against the person who broke his leg.

Akira couldn’t say the opposite of his own intentions, either. He wanted an easier year. He wanted his probation to not break him, to not be isolated because he wanted to help. His mind drifted to Suzui, of that room that made him sick. He could do it for her, though, for that book of girls that Kamoshida bragged about within his heart, for the tome of boys he so mercilessly stepped on.

He was not selfless, but that was okay.

There was also a chance that Kamoshida would live, an ending where all of his desires weren’t stripped from him, only the ones that had corrupted him. There was the chance that the students he had tortured and lusted after would get an apology.

Would that really be enough? Would an apology be sufficient enough for ruining people’s lives?

Didn’t Kamoshida deserve the same?

Didn’t he deserve to die?

“Yes.” He sent, feeling angry but unable to get it out; not an uncommon occurrence when he couldn’t scream until his lungs refused to work anymore.

Life or death… Kamoshida was going to pay.

Despite the crackling underneath his skin, begging for release, there was also some satisfaction at having made up his mind. This was something he could do.

“Can you tell Ryuji the plan?” Morgana asked, interrupting his satisfaction.

The cat began explaining without waiting for an answer.

Akira typed.

“Morgana says: Post the calling card in the morning, make sure it’s everywhere, so he can’t forget it before we have enough time to enter the Metaverse. The calling card should be enough to trigger the treasure into taking form. Once we have the treasure, Kamoshida’s shadow will try to take it back from us.”

Sakomoto took a long moment to reply, but eventually did so.

“Then we kick his stupid ass?”

Morgana stared at the screen, sighed, then nodded.

“Yes.”

“I gotta admit, dude, I don’t really get what he was saying about stealing desires, but
Kamoshida will end up like, braindead if mess up, right?”

He tried not to picture the eventuality that Sakamoto was presenting. Kamoshida’s large, imposing form, reduced to nothing but a pile of flesh on the floor. A vegetable.

Would he even have the drive to breathe?

“Yeah…”

He wondered if that would change Sakamoto’s mind, knowing, without a doubt, that whatever they did on Saturday, could have serious repercussions, and they could not be erased.

His phone buzzed again in his hand, but another force stopped him from seeing what it was.

Sakura-san had managed to sneak up on him. The looming shadow made him twitch violently away from the source.

“I’m leaving, make sure to lock up behind me.” He nodded, something that Sakura-san reciprocated along with a sturdy glare from behind the bifocals slipping down his nose. Guilt swarmed inside of him, and he couldn’t help but carefully slide his phone under the edge of the blanket.

“Also,” The older man tacked on, lifting an accusing finger that made his stomach drop. “Don’t harass the customers. Got it?” Again, he nodded.

Sakura-san nodded too, dropping his gaze towards Morgana, or Kaito. Some of his wrinkles smoothed out, making him look much younger than Akira had taken him for.

“Who’s a good cat?” Accusing fingers softened into waving strokes across a fur-coated spine. Morgana, somehow, grew even more relaxed, and began purring. Horror breached his large eyes, but he didn’t stop the rumbling until Sakura-san retracted his arm.

“Make sure he stays quiet.” Sakura-san’s voice was a mixture between how he speaks to Morgana and how he speaks to him, half stern and half cooing. He hated how refreshing it was, to not be completely patronized with every action he took.

Sakura-san left. Morgana’s disappointment was blatant, especially when the cat rolled over and rubbed at his fur-covered stomach.

Akira had other things distracting him, however.

He listened, very carefully for the sound of the café’s door to close for the final time before he sprung up from the bed and bolted down the stairs. A sharp turn and a frantic yank finally delivered him to sanctuary.

He peed.

Washed his hands.

Exited the bathroom.

He almost flicked the remaining lights off to the café, but a small whine captured his attention.

Morgana was sitting on the counter, even more prohibited territory. He was in the same pose he had been in when he’d fled to the restroom, patting at his stomach as if expecting something.
Oh...

Akira stepped away from the light panel and into the small kitchen LeBlanc had to offer. The perpetual stench of coffee and spices magnified indefinitely now that he was at the source. It was nearly overwhelming. Another firm yank opened a portal into every ingredient that went into LeBlanc’s staple dish.

Was curry safe for cats? He doubted it, even something as delicious as this curry in particular was, no doubt, dangerous for Morgana to consume.

Which left… his leftovers.

He felt bad, having let the food that Sakomoto bought him just sit around in the fridge, but it was nothing more than meat and broth; which meant safe for cats.

He hoped.

Akira plucked the box from the fridge, removing the only non-fresh looking artifact from the confines. Turning around, he noticed Morgana staring, looking as smug as ever, especially at the notion of being fed.

Bending open the lid, he set the box in front of the feline.

He supposed he could have heated it up. It wouldn’t have hurt him, but there was something deeply satisfying about watching his teammate struggle against the hardened chunks of beef. Immensely so.

“Now that I think about it,” Morgana said between slurps and smacks, much to his disgust, “I never got hungry in that other world.”

Akira shrugged in response, unsure how to take that information. He did make a make a mental note, however, to get Morgana more feline-safe food.

Does that mean he’s never been to the bathroom?

As well as a litterbox, he hoped that the Yen that that monster had dropped would be enough.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Joker?” Blue eyes drifted up to him, sprinkles of broth turning into dew for Morgana’s fine eyelashes.

Suddenly, a lot of his day made sense.

He was hungry!

His stomach squirmed. With the discomfort of his bladder gone, he noticed the pain of his emptiness now.

Ah.

Observing the briny slime dripping off of Morgana’s chin, the smell of meat wafting between the café’s natural aromas like a knife, the visible grease pit at the bottom of the container, he felt like throwing up. His body refused though, somehow knowing that nothing would come up. Not even water.

He chewed on his finger, contemplating for a long moment.
The pain refused to subside.

The anxiety, begging him not to give in, also refused to leave.

Both managed to overwhelm him into action. Without thinking, he turned around, entering the chamber of LeBlanc’s kitchen and identified his target.

The sought-after curry had glazed over from cooling for so long, making it resemble mud with vegetables sticking out of it. Not very appetizing, not even when it began boiling and he finally noticed the reductions in his vision.

There wasn’t any rice left for him to plate, and the anxious dread that was fueling his actions refused to do more than necessary. He was running on low energy, it seemed.

The curry, once heated, looked wonderful once it was met with pearly porcelain, yet shame still managed to creep its way into his system; refusing to be ignored as he shoveled spoonful after spoonful into his mouth. Giving into the needs of his body did nothing for the cramps that clamped between his organs, nor did a glass of water. Nor two.

Akira finished a little over half of his portion before each sensation became too much. The food, while delicious, felt like nothing more than swallowing still wet cement, thick globs winding down into his body.

He hated the feeling.

Still, he had eaten something, which meant he wouldn’t be passing out, involuntarily, at least.

After a third glass of water, he cleaned up the mess that he and Morgana had made; disposing of the takeout box and cleaning the dishes he had used. Once that was done, he made his way upstairs, collected his toothbrush and paste, tossed off his glasses, plugged his phone in, then traveled back down the stairs and into the café’s tiny bathroom. He peed, again, the relief not as monumental as it had been when the café had finally closed. Akira washed his face, brushed his teeth, and escaped from the cramped space of LeBlanc’s bathroom. Slowly, he made his way towards the entrance to the café, ignoring the way his heart turned into a thunderous drum; he knew that he wasn’t going out again, yet his body tensed in anticipation. He really wanted a bath. Ignoring his conflicting desires, Akira made sure the door to the café was locked, then finally turned off the lights.

He didn’t fear the dark, yet something about the midnight hue the café took on when the lights were off sent shocks across his skin. He made his way upstairs, ignoring the dread that seemed to follow.

The bed that Sakura-san had provided was nothing but a futon over a stack of boxes, yet somehow its embrace relaxed him, at least enough that he could feel his muscles losing their tension.

Morgana was quick to invade his personal space, taking up a large portion of the middle of the bed. The blackness of his fur seemed to glow under the beams of moonlight filtering in through the attic’s window, giving him a defining shape in the otherwise darkened room. It was, as things tend to be with his new pet, endlessly fascinating.

Putting a hand on Morgana’s head, he found himself drifting off.

There was a message from Sakomoto when his alarm finally broke through his unconsciousness.

“You feelin better, dude?”
He isn’t sure what to make of the message.

Akira takes his time getting ready for school, except for when it comes to getting dressed. Something about getting dressed in front of cat with a human mind unsettled him, even if that cat could only communicate with him and Sakomoto. It was better safe than sorry, though. Once his uniform was on, he pulled his schoolbag up from where it had been sitting by the stairs and moved it onto the bed for Morgana. Once that was finished, he made his way downstairs quietly, his toothbrush and paste in tow. Sojiro looked up as soon as his feet hit the landed. Apparently he had not been quiet enough. The older man nodded once, then looked away. Akira headed into the bathroom and readied himself for another school day.

Morgana was in the bag when he went back to the attic, and stared at him as he ascended, but said nothing.

Odd.

He didn’t question it though, Morgana was a fairly strange being. Gathering his phone and schoolbag, Akira deemed himself ready for school, at least physically.

Leaving the café, he flipped over the sign, and began walking towards the station.

Morgana sighed.

They were halfway towards the station when the same noise erupted from below him.

Akira stopped walking.

Rolling the bag off of his shoulder, he set Morgana on the ground in front of him before bending over.

Morgana’s eyes avoided his.

He continued to stare.

Morgana sighed again.

“J-joker?” Morgana asked, pawing at the jagged edges of his prison.

Akira raised a brow in answer, doing his best to look attentive.

“I, um…” Morgana squirmed, “I t-think, I have to do that thing that you do? M-my stomach is um…”

Oh.

He glanced around, looking for a suitably spot for a cat to relieve himself, for the first time, apparently. Tokyo, in his limited experience, was, unfortunately, not known for its open, yet private, fields of grass. Yongen-Jaya was no exception, it seemed. Spying an alley, he prayed that Morgana wasn’t going to be picky about location; beggars can’t be choosers, after all.

Sweeping up his schoolbag, and ignoring the high pitched yelp that followed, Akira headed towards the small alley. Stopping at the corner, he glanced inside of the empty space. Nothing but a small stream of water and a trashcan for company. It was better than nothing. Again, he sat down the bag, mindful of the puddles and Morgana leapt out of it to survey his new surroundings.

A frown. Clearly he wasn’t pleased.
“H-here?” The cat stuttered, visibly cringing.

Akira nodded, feeling a little warm in the face and unable to look the cat in the eyes.

Morgana sighed, but nodded in acceptance as well.

He backed out of the alley to give his teammate privacy, gathered enough distance that he could no longer hear Morgana trying to figure out how his body worked, but kept close enough that it wouldn’t be impossible to snatch the cat up and run. He still had to catch the train, after all.

With some free time, Akira took a moment to glance at his phone again and reread Sakomoto’s message.

He still didn’t have a response thought out. He’d already told the other boy that he was fine the previous night, why bother asking again? He couldn’t deny, however, that it didn’t feel weird not responding to a message; but why was Sakomoto, and others, still asking about his health. He was fine. He’d told Sakomoto as such already.

Maybe he’s just nosy.

Morgana appeared moments later, looking both relieved and mortified. He bent down, and patted his companion on the head, hoping to alleviate some of the strange tension the cat seemed to carry with him.

“L-let’s just go.” His teammate whined instead of purring, the reaction that he had been expecting.

Akira shrugged, but took to his full height and wrapped around the corner to grab his schoolbag with Morgana climbing into it just before he lifted it from the ground.

The rest of the journey was free of sighs, at least from either Morgana or himself, and he made it to school on time, despite the detour.

Takamaki, as well as the rest of the classroom, eyed him with visible suspicion as he entered, though the blonde’s was significantly more poignant in a way that he couldn’t describe. It might have been an aura she exuded or something, he couldn’t figure it out, nor did he have the time to ponder it much further since he was currently panicking about something else; having a fully-grown animal hanging out of the edge of his desk, not even bothering to appear inconspicuous with his flapping tail and visible gaze.

The cat, fortunately, remained silent. Which made him panic a little less, even as Ms.Chouno, not Chouno-sensei, called on him six times in a row. He was the only one who had done the reading, apparently; she cooed over him, even waiting patiently as he scribbled out answers on his whiteboard, which he tried to pretend wasn’t covered in cat hair. Definitely suspicious.

Ushimaru-sensei, however, was less than patient with their class, but didn’t call on him a single time.

“Settle down! We are the middle of class!” Technically, they were 56% done with this period, not that he was counting the seconds in his notebook until he was startled by Ushimaru-sensei’s yelling even louder than before.

“Enough! This is a classroom!”

“Wait, she’s going to jump!” A girl cried from the other end of the room, drawing Akira’s attention towards the voice. Was someone watching a drama in the middle of class?
More students stood up.

“Suzui?” A boy gasped.

Takamaki rocketed to her feet in an instant, “Shiho?”

Akira’s heart slammed against his chest once, like a jackhammer, then crackled to life in double speed.

He too, stood, and scrambled after Takamaki as she fled the classroom and glued herself to the hallway window.

Outside of it, on top of the roof, stood Suzui Shiho. She was barely a speck from the distance they were at, but Akira could make out the folds of her skirt fluttering in the wind like a dance. Her dark hair followed a similar method, whisking around like cherry blossoms in a storm.

Akira watched, mesmerized, frozen in time as Suzui’s form ejected from the roof of Shujin Academy.

Takamaki’s screams had long since muted in his ears.

Suzui’s fall took maybe a few seconds, but to him, watching through one of Shujin’s polished windows, it felt like a lifetime. An eon of nothing but frozen ice that evaporated the more gravity wrapped the girl in its embrace.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to make this much longer, but I hated not having something for you guys to read. So, here you go.

My birthday is in two days and someone got me a 5LB (A LOT!!) of gummy bears. They call me Gummy now.
For the second time since he’d started going to Shujin, classes had ended early. Ordinarily, he would be thankful, even more so when there was no readings assigned, yet Akira felt nothing, actual nothing, as he made his way to the station; being ushered quickly by the stampede of police and faculty. He didn’t even get a chance to message Sakamoto about meeting up before he was practically thrown on the train headed towards Yongen-Jaya.

Sakura-san’s face was grim, more so than usual, when he set foot in the café several hours before he was expected back.

Obviously, he heard the news.

Suzui Shiho had thrown herself off of Shujin Academy.

He hadn’t saved her, like he’d been intending to do with the stack of calling cards in Sakamoto’s possession. Instead, he settled on the mattress in the corner of LeBlanc’s attic and couldn’t find the strength to stand again, like a bug trapped in honey. Though, it wasn’t like he put much effort into actually moving. He lingered, like a bad smell, waiting to be fanned out.

There was no escape to be found in sleep, either. Each time his eyelids drooped into black, it was like clicking on a slideshow of his own failures. Kamoshida’s secret chamber, each image of Suzui, naked or barely dressed, exposing more and more bruises.

He’d barely noticed them as she was hurtling through the air.

*What was she thinking?* Akira couldn’t help but wonder. Each instance of flight replayed in his head endlessly.

*What did it feel like?*

*Did she feel free?*

Something about her suicide opened these thoughts to him. There were times, undoubtedly many, where he’d considered the same fate.

Crawling towards the edge and casting himself off. A ship to sea.

Would he look as graceful as Suzui did?

He doubted it.

“Hmm-hmm.” Came from his left, the clearing of a gravely throat.

Sakura-san.

He twisted his neck, and his eyes finally began to see again.

The older man wasn’t fidgeting, but there was something different, softer, about his stern gaze when it landed on him. Sakura-san extended his arm towards him and Akira’s body didn’t lurch away, didn’t attempt to gain distance that wasn’t there. He was too exhausted, too *empty*. His hand
didn’t reach for the plate, he had forgotten how to move his limb, it seemed. If it had been another school day, he had a feeling that Sakura-san would have yelled at him for being so slow, but today was a different occasion. Someone had thrown themselves off of a roof because he’d been too slow, too indecisive. Bruised, polite Suzui, a girl he didn’t know but had seen without clothes, had decided that her life wasn’t worth living. His caretaker took the necessary steps to stand right against the lip of the mattress, and sat down a plate next to him. Both curry and rice were steaming wispily in the strange draft of LeBlanc’s attic. His nose refused to smell anything but the ashy inhale of Kamoshida’s castle.

“You looked like you needed that.” Sakura-san said, tugging at his beard with one hand, the other firmly planted in his pocket. “It… must be hard losing a classmate.”

His caretaker, for once, didn’t seem upset with his lack of verbal response. Instead, the older male nodded, once, then turned on his heel and escaped from the atmosphere the café’s attic seemed to swim in.

Resting his head on his folded arms, Akira stared at the offered meal, observed its glistening texture and steam until it turned cold and congealed.

For the first time since he had arrived, Sakura-san closed the café before the sun went down. The bustle of the few customers he’d slinked past before he found himself becoming a vegetable long since turned into a deafening silence.

When the sun did set though, it was too difficult to stare at his uneaten meal without straining his eyes. Instead, Akira turned his head towards the wall and stared at the wooden panels with unseeing, unfocused eyes. At the moment, all that encompassed his world was a blur of brown, which was quickly turning black as more and more time passed.

His phone buzzed.

Twice.

Three times.

Then a few more.

He didn’t move. Could not exert enough effort to reach into the pocket of his uniform and pull out the device. Even the brief and drifting idea of reading had made him indefinitely more exhausted than he already was. Despite the state his mind was in- frazzled beyond recognition, unable to process anything more than a moment before going incredibly, irrevocably blank once again. It was almost laughable, really; almost amusing that he was the one lying like corpse when he wasn’t the one who had decided to end it all.

Why did she jump?

As bruised as she was, for as long as she was. Why now? Countless things could have spurred such a reaction. Suzui seemed stable enough when he had bumped into her; meek but polite, nice even. Nice to him, a criminal. It was unprecedented, especially considering the rumors that were constantly circulating about his background or dirty secrets. For someone to be pleasant to him, after being exposed to the limitless stream of labels assigned to him. It spoke volumes about who Suzui Shiho was as a person. As a byproduct, it also revealed to him, like a magnificent beacon, the true nature of Kamoshida, as well as Shujin Academy; things were corrupt within the school. The adults in charge of protecting students had failed that day. Failed to protect the sanctity of a life. Suzui’s life was traded for a reputation that was deemed more important. All because of volleyball,
all because of Kamoshida.

“Doesn’t he deserve to die?” His brain tingled, it had felt like an eternity since Arsene had bothered speaking to him.

He didn’t have an answer to Arsene’s question, the question only served to raise his own inquisition, his own morbid curiosity that he didn’t know he even had.

Did a life constitute a life? When the time came could he actually do it? Could he rip Kamoshida’s desires, all of them, away from him and leave him as a husk of a person? The decision would answer his earlier question, though. However, there were more pressing matters, though. Would it be acceptable to send the calling card so soon after a major incident? Would someone know that he and Sakamoto had planned an attack or would it seem like a random vendetta?

He should confer with Sakamoto, it was his choice too, after all; he doubted Morgana would care if the man died or lived or just stopped breathing due to their actions.

“Hey dude…”

“That was… terrible.”

“We could have stopped this dammit!!”

“Dude!”

“She’s alive!!”

That was startling. In a good way, of course. Her condition, from what little he had seen from the second story window, was disturbing to think about.

“I don’t care what happens to that ASSHOLE now, we have to beat his ass!”

Sakamoto’s input was what he’d expected, to be honest. The blond had a blatant vendetta against Kamoshida even before they had discovered his castle. Akira couldn’t help but agree with Sakamoto’s sentiments, aside from the excessive cursing.

“You still want to send the calling card tomorrow?” He had to make sure, he had to eliminate all doubts. If they were going to stoop to Kamoshida’s level—though was it really stooping if they didn’t leave him an option but to die, then they needed to act as a team, to push with one will until they pierced through the wall that was Kamoshida. Though, he had to admit, it did seem callous of them to just continue with their plans right after someone had committed—attempted suicide.

“Let’s pull this off”

“Ryuji seems excited.”

Akira jumped.

Morgana has somehow crawled beside him and was, apparently, reading their correspondence. In the dim evening light, he could barely make out the outline of Morgana’s blue eyes crinkled in mischief. Not something he was a fan of, if he were being honest.

“Tomorrow’s the big day, huh?” The cat asked calmly, but despite the tone, Akira could hear his tail whipping around wildly.
Akira nodded, unsure if Morgana could even see the motion in the dark.

“We should probably rest up then, it’s going to be unlike anything we’ve dealt with so far. Who knows what kind of form Kamoshida will take when we approach him…” Morgana advised.

He could rest.

It was difficult, to know what was to come when he woke up; he also found it difficult to even lose himself in sleep, constantly picturing himself in Suzui’s place as she fell. His body jolted him awake several times, his muscles tensing in apprehension in a descent that never finished.

His slumber was not ideal, but it was sufficient enough, at least for today. Adrenaline surged through him as soon as his alarm went off. His body circulated thousands of signals underneath his skin, all saying one thing: it’s time.

Sakamoto messaged him soon after he escaped from the warmth of Morgana’s residual heat.

“I could barely sleep last night, I’m so amped up!”

As was becoming more frequent the more he exchanged texts with Sakamoto, the more he became confused as to what the blond was saying, and how to respond to these sentiments. He was rather out of his element when it came to communicating with people his own age, even over technology, where he was on an even field instead of at a disadvantage. The, plainly put, liberating feeling that came along without feeling like an awkward attachment to a conversation was lost when he traded IDs with Sakamoto. Sure, he didn’t have to pull out his board and write out a reply in a short amount of time.

He didn’t respond, he took that time towards his appearance, trying to quell down the mess that was his hair, somehow both dry and greasy, but overall a gigantic mess. Akira took very meticulous care of his appearance, making sure to look well-presenting, as all Shujin Academy students were expected to be, but also trying to maintain an essence of nonchalance, to look like he was, in fact, full of righteous energy and exerting it wildly as he dressed himself to look casual. Overall, he looked about the same, still short, still with a messy tangle of black hair, but with very large, mostly fashionable glasses that distracted people from looking at his hair. He hoped that was the case, anyway. There was also the matter of dusting cat hair off of his uniform, which only served to mix the locations of the gleaming threads around instead of removing them; he’d made an attempt at least, nobody could deny that. He washed his face too aggressively, however, to make up for his slight failure with the uniform and ended up with an entirely pink face, only magnifying the effect under the lenses of his glasses. Overall, in his attempt to appear nonchalant, he ended up looking very, very noticeable.

Sakura-san winced visibly once he walked past the bar, but remained silent, the kindness from the day before still in effect, at least enough to not comment on his appearance, as well as offer him another plate of food. Akira kept his face carefully blank as he realized that neither he nor Morgana had actually touched the plate from the night before.

He sat at the bar, on the far seat, and just close enough to Sakura-san that it didn’t seem too weird, but also not far away enough that he was suspicious or ungrateful looking. A well-maintained, benign distance.

Morgana scampered into his lap, clawing and dragging at the pants of his uniform in an attempt to be covert. This also did not show on his face. He had to admit, however, that the warm weight upon his lap was fairly pleasant, though also very strange, considering Morgana had the mind of a human while in the body of a cat. It was an unsettling thought; knowing that if his lap was
uncomfortable, Morgana could not only feel it, but also inform him of such things.

The cat sighed.

Akira pretended not to notice the sound of three people breathing in an empty café when there were only meant to be two of them, it seemed Sakura-san was doing very much the same as he fiddle with a book of crossword puzzles.

He tended to his plate, another large, steaming portion of curry and rice. Still hesitant to eat, especially with a sentient mind in his lap, as well as across the counter, he took slow bites, his gaze flicking from Morgana and Sakura-san in random intervals. Things remained calm, though, despite the chills that raced down his back.

After cleaning his plate, he had deemed it time to go, and grabbed the bag that Morgana was supposed to be in already, and shoved his teammate in there as gingerly, yet quickly, as possible and headed towards the door.

Flipping the café’s sign, he started to make paces towards the bus station, still attempting to be both casual yet covert; inconspicuous. As a teenager, criminal record or not, it should be easy enough to blend in, yet whenever someone’s eyes rove over him, he can’t help but feel each hair on the back of neck tense up anxiously, like they might call him out any moment. He knew it was improbable though, very few people talked on the trains in Tokyo—the quiet deathtraps that they were, nor did he have the stack of calling cards on him; he can’t imagine the kind of pressure that Sakamoto must be feeling at the moment or on his trek to school.

A lot. He figures.

By the time he makes it to Shujin Academy, Akira is fairly certain he is going to have a mental breakdown, or something similar at least. The pressure casting his shoulders into a slump, the buckets of sweat that are leaking from every pore on his body are enough to make him reconsider. He can’t back out now, though.

The first thing he sees when he walks through the gleaming glass doors of Shujin Academy is red. So much red. Streamers of crimson send his heart, and his mind, racing while the world around him seems to slow to a frozen halt. The whispers are moving like packs of fish in different streams, but every tail end of conversation that manages to drift into his ear is nearly identical; each spoken in sullen, surprised whispers. The gossip is forbidden rapture upon a devout group of followers, however, he’s not sure if the inkling of rebellion is enough for everyone. Their fear is almost a thick cloud that floats around everyone in the hallway. The students are scared, terrified of the truth or Kamoshida; probably both. The faculty, from what he can see, are ignoring the situation as it is. The walls remain coated in blood and he can’t help but wonder just how many copies that Sakamoto made of the calling card for them to be everywhere.

Speaking of.

Sir Kamoshida Suguru, the utter bastard of lust,

We know how shitty you are, and that you put your distorted desires on students who can’t fight back

That’s why we have decided to steal away your desires

And make you confess your sins.
The calling card was all but signed by Sakamoto, he could practically hear each word spewing from the blond’s mouth as it was printed off.

“Hmm.” Morgana hummed, his head wiggling between the straps of the bag to take in Sakamoto’s work, “It’s a bit sloppy… but people are already in a panic, so it’ll have to do.”

Akira shrugged, he thought it sounded pretty cool, though the logo was a bit strange; a pair of creepy eyes under a top hat with a massive, shark-toothed grin. Graffiti-styled text wrapped under the cocky grin, *take your heart.* Again, it felt very Sakamoto. He just hoped that nobody else caught onto such minute details. Though there seemed to be very few, if any, students that really seemed like they were capable of such a bold act of rebellion.

“Who’s responsible for this?” Someone hollered over the deafening roar of the student body.

The entrance hall silenced instantly.

All at once, he was thrown back into Kamoshida’s castle, into the entrance hall where Sakamoto had awakened to his persona. The swell of people, the blinding light, the intense furrowing of Kamoshida’s brow.

If possible, his already racing heart went into overdrive, and the need to escape was like a drug he was addicted to. Quickly, he pushed through the throng of students, who may as well have been statues before the intense, predatory gaze that Kamoshida was firing across the hallway. Bodily after body, he was able to find a clearing, and finally the bathroom. Breathing too hard to be healthy, he barged into the boy’s room, ignoring the way it went too silent after he all but stumbled through the door like a rabid animal. After a moment, most likely realizing who it was that had startled them, the bathroom cleared out with the squeaking of leather on heavily waxed floors. His vision was nearly swimming by the time he managed to lock himself in one of the stalls, his breathing coming out in quick, labored pants.

Akira was going to die.

The sudden, hard-hitting feeling of having his chest compressed more than his body was already squeezing itself was enough to drop his jaw, and attempt at screaming. Nothing came out but a mere gurgling sound, which was quickly interrupted by the need to breathe, his body refusing to slow to the average draw of breathe.

“Joker!” Morgana shrieked from just below him, the pressure against his chest. Through the convulsions of his spine, he managed to glance down eventually, and spotted two nearly glowing eyes. Morgana’s irises were shot out of proportion, looking wider than he had ever seen them before. Morgana’s jaw kept upending and closing, but Akira couldn’t hear anything past the pounding rhythm between his ears and the hammer thrashing at each of his ribs.

“Joker,” He eventually heard, “What is wrong with you?!” More pushing, more prickled paws kneading at his constricted chest.

“You need to calm down!” Morgana pleaded, not sounding calm himself in the slightest.

*Calm down!*

“What the hell is going on?” Arsene’s voice echoed between his ears, sending chills down his
cramping back, Akira shuddered. “You cannot fulfill our contract if you are weak! Get a hold of yourself, you fool!”

Despite the condescension, Akira found himself reacting to Arsene’s voice from within him, just enough to find a foothold on controlling his own body. Slowly, sensation started to seep back into him, as if his own life-force were being poured back into his own body. The burning in his lungs was the first perception he was opened to, like an inferno from within, baking his insides. The next thing to return was his vision, a combination of his eyes squeezing shut and the lack of oxygen, though it was undeniably blurry he wasn’t able to feel the wetness on his cheeks for another long moment. The last thing to go was the aching in his chest, which left a cold numbness that surrounded his entire body, leaving him completely limp and lethargic aside from his hands, which refused to unlatch from the clumps of heated fur they had clamped onto. He supposed he should feel bad for Morgana, for putting his teammate through this, yet he couldn’t find it within himself to push away from the void that had managed to put him in a state of ease. A far stretch from the distressed breakdown he nearly had inside of a mostly public restroom.

“Joker?” Morgana voiced, more hesitant than anything.

Akira felt like crap, and that feeling didn’t sway when he finally managed to release the vice he’d created on Morgana’s stretchy flesh, practically binding the two of them together.

His return to clarity must have shown on his face, as Morgana continued speaking to him, still in the same tone as before; unsure, confused, maybe even a little scared, but definitely unnerved. “W-what happened to you? You were breathing all funny—it looked like you were going to pass out or something…” Not fully governing control over his body, especially his fine motor skills, Akira decided not to pull out his phone to give a detailed answer, though he wasn’t too sure what had happened to him either, or why it was Arsene who was able to pull him out of such a state. Instead, he just shrugged, offering his teammate a kind smile, or at least he hoped it looked kind.

Morgana did not look placated, but didn’t press for answers. The cat allowed himself to be put back inside of the bag and Akira allowed himself to give a few pats atop of Morgana’s head.

Now they just had to make it through the rest of the day, and the treasure would be theirs.

When he walked into class, people stared, which still unnerved him, but there was something distinctly different about the looks he received today, or rather the lack of looks. Instead of being scanned with every set of available eyes within his homeroom, only a few stared. Today though, some of the kids eyed each other with suspicion that had been, until recently, reserved for him alone. It was odd.

_The calling card must have put everyone on edge._

Whispers of Kamoshida flew across the room, accusations piercing the tranquility that Shujin Academy was desperate to keep.

Suzui’s suicide attempt had clearly opened some doors, as well, though no one dared to mention her.

Lessons moved both far too quickly, and far too slowly, each hour that passed felt like more than double that; by the time the clock even began to approach the end of the school day, Akira’s nerves were already fried again. Fortunately, he didn’t have another instance where he had to excuse himself to the restroom. It seemed that he wasn’t the only one feeling the ominous pressure the calling card had sparked to life. Countless legs and pencils were bouncing anxiously as the teachers tried their best to ignore whatever situation was clearly unravelling all of them; whether it was
Suzui’s fall or Kamoshida’s outrage, everyone had a reason to be nervous.

As soon as the last lesson started, Sakamoto messaged him.

“By the gates, let’s get this bastard”

“Okay.”

Akira allowed himself to zone out for the entire period, he was feeling lucky not to have been called on, though if he had, he doubted he would have noticed.

The bell rang.

For once, he was one of the first people to escape the classroom, only to bump into yet another person.

Rubbing at his head, he considered his misfortune, as well as the icy spike of nostalgia that rattled up his spine. The last time he had bumped into someone, it had been Suzui, which was his only actual interaction with the girl, aside from watching her attempt to end her own life. Knowing that it would be nearly, if not completely impossible, he looked up, unable to quell the small ounce of hope that managed to overwhelm him.

It wasn’t Suzui, that much was obvious.

The person he had ran into towered over him, with broad, muscled shoulders and a frown filled with contempt.

“No so fast, Kurusu-kun,” Kamoshida greeted, his friendly façade visibly cracking with each word. “Why don’t we talk in my office?” A smile, a dangerous, knife-like smile cracked between Kamoshida’s lips. The same expression he wore in the Metaverse.

Knowing he wasn’t in a position to decline, Akira merely shrugged his shoulders and found himself unable to continue to look at Kamoshida’s face any longer. The man was clearly unhinged by the endless rumors that had spawned in just one day; highly-guarded secrets that were now being put in the open.

Kamoshida spun on one of his over-muscled legs and began walking. Students moved out of the man’s way without looking at him directly, like how one might evade a wild animal. It put Kamoshida off, that much Akira could tell, though in reality, he doubted anything had actually changed; people still feared him.

Kamoshida’s office was a mixture of a locker room and the remnants of an office. Mesh bags of volleyballs made small mountains across the floor and poured off the tops of some shelving. Equally large stacks of papers and folders were scattered around the flat surfaces of the room, which was shared with countless, gleaming trophies, medals, and plaques that produced a warm glow due to the dim lighting. Together, the room was both welcoming and foreboding. Though the latter could be deduced to who was in the office, rather than what.

“Close the door.” The man ordered in a tone that was all too familiar.

Akira complied, nudging the barrier shut with his foot, unable to turn his back to Kamoshida. The bright gleam from the corridor’s hallways melted into the darkened floorboards as the door slid shut. Once it nudged into place, a chill seemed to sweep over the room; the chatter of the hallway seemed to phase out, sizzling into nothing like a flame suddenly extinguished.
“That wasn’t very nice, what you two did, you know.” Kamoshida’s voice shot across the room now that it was just the two of them, like physical blows that threatened to send him into another spell of hyperventilating.

“Hey, are you listening!” Was all but shouted when seconds ticked by without a response. Kamoshida, who had been leaning against desk, straightened up and was, once again, a towering mass of arrogance and muscle.

Akira nodded, doing his best at subtlety as he skidded backwards, attempting to maintain the distance that Kamoshida was now trying to close.

“I bet you think you’re so clever, don’t you?” He hadn’t been able to draw up the conviction to look directly at Kamoshida and didn’t see it coming when his head was suddenly jerked to the side, a thunderous pain spreading through his cheekbone. Underneath him, Morgana gasped loudly; Akira had forgotten he was present. It only added to the humiliation that was quickly freezing his body.

The position of his face was quickly reset back to facing forward with a firm, unjust grip.

“Coming in here, in my school and spreading those rumors, those lies!” Again, his head was flung to the side with unpredictable force, the friction sparking fires under every layer of skin. His head began to throb painfully.

Again, Kamoshida took a grip on his face, angling his face forward until he could catch glimpses of the man’s chest heaving in rage.

“Little shits like you think you can just walk over anything, huh? Anyone?” Another hard smack; another grip wrenching his skull back into place. “This is my place! You’re just shit under my shoes, you know that?!”

“I should expel you for this…” His heart stuttered as the words took on meaning; Kamoshida cackled loudly, “Actually, I think I will…”

Another, burning whack crackled across his cheek finally sent him toppling to the ground, only held up with by his body colliding with the corner.

“Get out of here.” Kamoshida warned, “Your days are numbered here, scum.”

The man, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened—and Akira supposed, they hadn’t, whirled himself around, and took a seat at his desk, not even sparing him another look.

Numb, Akira took his offered retreat, tumbling out of Kamoshida’s office and down the stairs. His cheek was flaring in pain, but there was a deep-set ache that pulsed over his entire body.

Sakamoto was lingering by the gates, as promised. The blond’s head instantly perked up as he made his towards him, as if sensing that he was approaching.

“D-dude, what the hell!” The blond growled out, latching onto the crux of his forearm to pull him even closer when Akira refused to continue. Brown eyes were glued onto his burning flesh while he made a long observation of the grass they were currently crushing.

“What the fuck happened?” Sakamoto ordered.

He remained silent, toeing at the perfectly sculpted grass until it looked a little less orderly. It’s not like it mattered anyway.
“Dude!” His teammate barked out explosively, the grip on his arm now squeezing uncomfortably.

“It was Kamoshida…” Morgana offered, revealing his presence once again. Akira cringed. “That bastard called Joker into his office and then went completely crazy!” Sakamoto growled, rumbling like a rather ferocious animal, a ferocious animal in a graphic-tee and sneakers.

“Goddammit!” The grip on his arm was released and Akira watched, only for a moment, as Sakamoto started marching towards the entrance of the school before he decided to restrain the other teen.

“What the hell, man!” Sakamoto snapped, tugging at his arm, “We gotta make that stupid asshole pay for that!”

With much difficulty, he managed to pull his cellphone out from underneath Morgana and begin typing, all the while keeping a firm enough grip on Sakamoto so he didn’t escape; a very arduous task.

“Doesn’t matter if we change his heart”

It was sound enough logic. It seemed sufficient for Sakamoto as well, as the man’s muscles deflated under his grip and he deemed it safe enough for him to release his teammate without fear of getting them both expelled.

With the fight visibly drained from his teammate, he took the liberty of leading the blond away from the campus and down the road, towards the alley where this had all started, and where it all would soon end. Thing would be normal after today, he was sure of it.

“H-hey!” Someone yelled from across the street, just as Sakamoto activated the MetaNav, sending them spiraling away from the noisy streets of Tokyo. “W-what the—“ The same voice from before gasped, making Akira’s head finally cock around and send a blasting pain to travel up his face in doing so.

Just a meter away stood Takamaki, looking terrified beyond belief, the expression completely evident on her foreign features. The darkened sky did nothing but add to the expression.

“What is this place?” She questioned, looking between him and Sakamoto. “W-woah, A—Takamaki?” His companion inquired, finally taking notice of the person who seemed to have followed them in.

“You know this girl?” Morgana asked from below, weaving in between them to walk closer to Takamaki.

“M-m-monster cat?” The girl cried out, followed by a short shriek of terror. Morgana visibly deflated, looking rather downtrodden.

“Wait, that voice; Ryuji?” Beside him, Sakamoto visibly flinched, the visible part of his face curled up in an aggressive cringe.

“How the hell did you get in here?” He snapped in place of an answer as he crossed his arms across his chest.

Takamaki mimicked the action, “I could ask you the same question; what is this place, what’s with that castle?” She retorted with equal vigor. Akira held back a sigh, did they really have time for
this? Technically, the answer was yes.

Sakamoto sighed, “Just get out of here, Takamaki.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on, Sakamoto!” She retorted, now raising a fist as if she might punch one of them.

Sakamoto stepped forward, growling once again.

Akira stood there, slightly stunned, as he watched his teammate all but manhandle his classmate out of the Metaverse, a strange sight indeed. Soon the blonde was warped away in a swirl of black and red and Sakamoto was left there, panting, with one more scratch on his cheek than he’d had before.

His teammate turned back to him, “Ya coulda helped, you know.” The muttered bitterly. Akira nodded, hesitantly, not really sure how to respond to that.

“Ryuji,” Morgana called, still in the same place where he’d shut down from Takamaki’s insult, “Who was that beautiful girl?” Akira grimaced; of course Morgana would be distracted by that, today of all days.

“Doesn’t matter.” Skull grunted back, thrusting his yellow-clad hands into the midnight folds of his disguise and leading the way towards Kamoshida’s castle.

The closer they were to the massive structure, the thicker the atmosphere seemed to get. Screams of the torture called out in lashing gales. By the time they approached their entry point, he could practically feel Kamoshida’s rage calling out to him, a burning anger that seemed to burn the air, leaving a thick, acrid fog to settle over the castle’s grounds. Still, they could not step backwards.

They avoided the guards in places where they could, and destroyed those where they couldn’t; today, they were not here to train their bodies or their personas, they were here to put an end to the madness behind their lives.

The treasure took the shape of a very, very large, and shiny, crown, complete with all sorts of jewels that he’d have no luck in naming. The jewelry piece was far too big to fit on anyone’s head, even Kamoshida’s, yet Morgana had insisted, quite fervently, that this was the piece that they were looking for, the fruits of the calling card finally revealed.

They’d barely managed to lift the obnoxiously large crown before an ear-piercing scream caused the three of them to jump in place. The gold ring clattered the few inches to the floor in a loud clang, easily giving away their position to those who dared to listen.

The scream went off again, only now forming words, “What the hell! Get off of me, you creep!” Shrieked loud enough that they echoed on the walls hiding them.

Akira’s stomach dropped from where it had been pinched up in fear.

“How did she get back in?” He considered as he dashed after the blond, Morgana practically on his heels.

“She is the other way!” Morgana whined, but almost refused to detach himself from...
Akira’s hip as they followed the trails of sparks Sakamoto left behind as he soared into the throne room that guarded the treasure they were supposed to be stealing at this very moment.

“Takamaki!” Sakamoto roared from just in front of them. The blond was bent over the sculpted marble railing that wrapped around the perimeter of the room, looking down on the floor just below, where the actual throne of the throne room was held. Just beside said throne. Following Sakamoto’s line of sight, Akira leaned over the railing and caught an eyeful of what was most definitely Takamaki’s hair topping off a screaming mouth and restrained limbs.

“Ryuji!” She managed to scream over the large distance between them, her gaze, though Akira could not see her eyes, looked up to where they were, though Akira found his attention drawn to the figures beside the captured girl.

A near carbon-copy of the girl who sat in front of him was practically nude, and draping herself over the equally as undressed Kamoshida, who he only identified by what little he was wearing. Numerous guards formed a semi-circle around the display, all with gleaming, extravagant blades that wept for death.

“Let he go, you fucking bastard!” Ryuji screamed from above, looking like he might make the risk of jumping from the rafters instead of taking the stairs.

“Sakamoto, and you!” Kamoshida hissed, his golden eyes shining like two candles in the dimness of the throne room. “I told you if you returned here, I would kill you both, didn’t I, and now you’ve brought a third!” He exclaimed, stepping forward to take another look at the new trespasser. Akira took the distraction to move towards the stairs on the far end of the room, allowing him to close the distance between him and Kamoshida, Sakamoto and Morgana were quick to follow, spreading out enough to start closing in on Kamoshida and his entourage.

“What the hell, Kamoshida!” Takamaki screamed, now that they were closer, Akira could clearly see the distress in the lines of his classmate’s face, the tightening of her brow and lips between each outburst. Kamoshida’s hand lashed out, his fingers, like talons, finding purchase in the fleshy parts of Takamaki’s chin and gripping hard. A sight he hadn’t seen, yet could feel the phantom sensations of.

Kamoshida cackled, “Did you really think you’d be able to take it?” He inquired, the question clearly pointed at all of them, though his attention was obviously focused solely on Takamaki now.

Clearly, the man hadn’t expected a response, as he began shouting before they’d had a chance to collect their wits, “Execute the girl! Then deal with those two!” He ordered, jerking his hand in their direction.

Kamoshida moved aside, towards the clone of Takamaki, who giggled benignly as large, bare arms encircled her. A guard took the place that the man had previously occupied, a shimmering longsword held firmly in his grasp, which was quickly tucked above the cleft of Takamaki’s bust. The blonde increased her efforts in escaping the manacles that held her firmly to a large piece of metal that seemed to have sprouted from the ground. Without hesitation, Sakamoto surged forward, screaming in outrage at the order, but was quickly intercepted by two of the other guards who had been doing nothing but taking up space.

Takamaki continued to scream.

Akira watched, rather numbly, as the obnoxiously large blade seemed to slice gracefully across the exposed canvas of Takamaki’s body. How something so large could create such a precise mark, a paper thin slice that spanned across her chest horizontally, he would never know. What he did
know, had cognizance over, however, was that they were all going to die if he did nothing.

Arsene’s wings gasped out a powerful gale the swept his hair up in a frenzy as he was unleashed, the rattling of chains soon followed and his persona, the other part of him, lashed out at the two guards attempting to restrain his teammate. Black essence swallowing them up, drowning them in hatred and then disintegrating them, turning them into nothing but ashes.

Free of conflict, Sakamoto was allowed to holler out again, “Ann! Think of Shiho, it was this fucktard that did it to her!” He belted out, Captain Kidd manifesting behind him in a grim shadow of yellow light, the pirate’s face strobing into detail as bolts of lightning shot across the room, electrifying the shadow that was attempting to carve the blonde up.

“No! That was your own fault, you bitch!” Kamoshida roared back, stepping between the three of them. The man seemed to sizzle before them, dark wisps of something itching out from underneath his skin as the look in his eyes went from sickening yellow to something far brighter.

“Fuck you!” Sakamoto screamed, aiming a finger towards the deranged king and firing off even more lightning, sending blinding waves of light throughout the room.

One by one, the other guards in the room shattered into nothing, leaving only Kamoshida as adversaries for the three of them, and only Takamaki as liability lest they fail.

“You fucking kids!” Kamoshida shouted, even more tar oozing from his body now, “This is my castle! I’m the king! Me!” He crooned as he fell onto his knees, though Akira knew it wasn’t pain that caused the display.

The oozing evolved until it dripping from each part of Kamoshida’s body in thick pustules, the splattered noisily as they slapped onto the floor around Kamoshida’s feet, but did not spread beyond the man, forming a shiny black circle that continued to grow in height until Kamoshida’s bare feet were no longer visible. With a final, deafening scream, Kamoshida thrust an arm out, not towards them nor at Takamaki and Akira almost had time to be confused before the massive, shiny ring of Kamoshida’s crown burst into the room and levitated onto his oozing head. The reaction was even more splattering of dark ooze and smoke as Kamoshida’s body expanded and exploded into a reckless abomination of rusty colored limbs, each rippling with massive, oversized muscles. The jutting edges of the crown were nearly level with the balcony that wrapped around the room, easily giving Kamoshida several meters in height that seemingly spawned from nowhere but sheer force of will.

Panicking, Akira swept his hand forward, sending whatever power he could propelling towards Kamoshida’s new form, begging for the magic to tear him into shreds before any of them could get hurt.

“Bastard!” Sakamoto roared once more, upending more blinding light onto Kamoshida, followed by the deafening roar of ripping wind from Morgana.

Neither of their attacks seemed to have an effect on the man turned beast.

One of Kamoshida’s arms stretched out once more, but once again, didn’t reach for either of them. Instead, large, swollen digits wrapped around the waist of Takamaki’s clone, who was still in her own world and not paying any mind to the fact that she was being lifted several meters off the ground. The girl, if anything, seemed to preen under the ministrations, purring loud enough for all of them to ear and nuzzling against the giant vice that had formed around her lithe form. Knowing full well it was a clone, a figment of Kamoshida’s disturbed imagination, did nothing to ease Akira’s disgust as he watched his classmate—a copy of his classmate, dressed in only her
underwear, get picked up by an enormous, crimson fist. Takamaki’s clone was placed between the large boxes of Kamoshida’s teeth almost delicately, and swiftly ripped in half with a sickening crunch. A cloud of red burst from the corpse, the squirming of her now severed legs ceased, save for the final twitch as her lower half sprayed more and more blood onto Kamoshida’s teeth. The man turned beast wrapped his tongue, a sickening red appendage that was reminiscent of a frog’s in length, around the remaining parts of Takamaki and sucked her into his mouth with a disturbing slurp.

He’d barely held in his disgust, the swirling burning of acid only held down by the muscles of his throat clamping down against his will.

Sakamoto unleashed another attack, much more powerful than the last and infinitely more blinding.

It did nothing, however, to stop Kamoshida from reaching down for another morsel.

Takamaki screamed, though Akira could hear the weakness in her voice as the girl started to hyperventilate.

“You can fight this!” Morgana tried, his rapier slashing into Kamoshida’s legs with little success in stopping or even slowing him down. “Don’t you want to make him pay?”

“You, what about her?!” Sakamoto tried desperately, his voice still cracking and having a dampening effect on his volume. Would Takamaki even hear them? Would she be able to fight it, to find the strength to do so?

Not knowing the answer, Akira stepped forward, sending spell after spell towards Kamoshida’s arm, trying to stall for time until either Takamaki escaped or Sakamoto and Morgana could help her down.

“Sakamoto!” Takamaki gasped out, then once again louder, sobbing as her form was lifted higher and higher towards the guillotine of Kamoshida’s jaw, her fist, a mere speck in comparison, slammed down on the fleshy parts of Kamoshida’s grip. It did not loosen.

Takamaki screamed, a terrible shrill noise that penetrated every pore of Akira’s skin, causing hair upon hair to rise up in an anxious wave.

The sounds of flame igniting from thin air evaporated Takamaki’s scream.

He could not see if Takamaki had been torn in half.

The entire room was coated in bright, ominous blue light, the intensity flicking around from corner to corner as a whirlwind of flame consumed the entirely of Kamoshida’s clenched fist. The man screamed a deafening, piercing screech of pain before he reeled the offending limb back, and flung it towards the ground. The inferno followed, its flames licking up the air until it formed a massive blue fireball that grew taller and wider than Kamoshida was. The flames screamed and screamed like the howling of wind until finally, they took shape.

Staggering to her feet, Takamaki stepped out of a plume of smoke and ash, swathed in nothing but red, the massive form shadowing her dressed in identical hues, a long cigar hanging between her pinched up, blackened lips.

A persona!
“Kamoshida,” Takamaki spoke, a firm, quiet tone that seemed to manifest around the entire room, the same way the first flame had managed to, “I’m going to kill you!” Her whisper turned into a roar, just as flames came to life in the palms of her hands.

Twin fireballs split from between her fingers, arcing in opposite directions and slamming into Kamoshida’s sides with a thunderous crack. The beast squealed, though it did nothing to distract from the sound of his flesh beginning to sizzle and char within moments. Large chunks of Kamoshida’s sides began to crack loudly and soon toppled down, like cherry blossoms in a breeze. Kamoshida’s charred flesh smacked onto the ground and exploded in a small plume of charcoal and ash.

In an instant, four sources of magic were wrapping around Kamoshida’s new, dangerous form, squeezing him and crushing him until he burst into flames over and over again. Thick white beams of blinding light crackled from beneath his skin as it was ripped open with an endless, ravenous gale. His massive, golden eyes bulged out of their sockets as flames flickered behind them, the tail ends managing to peek out of the edges of Kamoshida’s sockets, causing them to melt into nothing but ooze that soon began to slide down the monster’s face like thick, white tears. Kamoshida shrank into nothing, the same black ooze that had built him up seeped out of him and melted into the floor until only the man remained, naked and weeping; his eyes still missing.

They all stepped forward.

Kamoshida’s form trembled as they surrounded him.

“W-wait! Don’t kill me!” He pleaded, pitching himself onto his knees in front of Takamaki, the empty voids of his eye sockets darting around aimlessly. Instead of a response, the blonde summoned another fireball within the palm of her hand with an audible whoosh, and stared down at the man who’d just tried to kill her, unimpressed, though Kamoshida could not see as much.

Akira looked to Morgana, then to Sakamoto.


The flames, if anything, grew bigger, brighter and Takamaki reeled back, screaming, “Why! Why shouldn’t I take everything from him, like he did to Shiho? Like he did to you?” Sakamoto flinched.

“He didn’t kill me.” He said, even lower than before, “I’m still here.”

The flames dimmed, just a little, though remained just as dangerous; just as deadly. “He deserves to die.” She countered, though it wasn’t as convincing as it had been before.

“Yeah…” Sakamoto agreed, twisting his neck around to glance at Kamoshida, then towards him. Sakamoto winked.

“ Wouldn’t it better revenge if we just changed his heart? To make him repent for everything he’s done?” The blond offered.

Takamaki stood quietly for a moment, her hands still flaming brightly, “Y-you can do that?” She asked without skepticism.

Sakamoto nodded.

The flames died out, small plumes of smoke twisting out of her gloves and disappearing along with
the remaining light in the room.

The two of them turned back towards Kamoshida, who was whimpering on the floor, begging for mercy, for forgiveness. It made his blood boil, just a bit.

“How do we fix this shitfuck, Mona?” Skull asked, directing the conversation onto Morgana for the first time, the cat’s oceanic eyes gleamed brightly in the dimness of the room.

“Give him orders to repent for his sins, and he should return to his heart.” The cat supplied, walking away from the group.

“Shitfuck,” Sakamoto addressed, making Kamoshida whimper even louder, but turn in his direction, “You’re gonna tell everyone what you did, police, the principal, everyone! And you’re going to apologize to everyone you’ve ever hurt, even if it takes the rest of your life, got it?”

Kamoshida cried out, “Yes!”

Golden light crackled to life around Kamoshida’s body, remarkably and unjustly beautiful, and promptly spluttered in nothing, leaving nothing but a whisper behind, “I’m sorry, all of you.”

“Hm.” Morgana hummed, drawing Akira’s attention away from his other teammate to look at the cat, who now held a smaller, more practical version of Kamoshida’s crown between his two paws.

“Treasure secured, Joker!” The cat cheered.

Akira smiled, and walked over to his smallest teammate to give him a rather professional and congratulatory rub on his head.

Morgana purred wildly, only for the noise to be overshadowed by an even louder rumbling.

“What the hell?” Skull suddenly shouted, twisting his head to look for another sign of danger.

The rumbling grew in span and volume, a rapturous tenor that shook towards the heavens until it was just underneath them.

The floor split open, a fissure that he heard rather than saw before the entire floor was split into two even pieces.

Akira, for the second time that day, found purchase in Morgana’s fur, just below the neck, and began running towards the exit.

“Skull!” Mona called out from the hallway. Stomping immediately followed.

Blinded by clouds of smoke and fire, created from the rupturing of the infrastructure of Kamoshida’s castle, Akira blindly navigated his way towards the entrance hall, unable to use eyes or his lungs sent him into a blind panic as each of his senses were slowly drifting away from him. The sensation of being alive, though, that never left. His heart pumped loudly over the sound of collapsing stone, the huff of his throat rasping along as his feet found purchase on unsteady ground.

Silence.

He had made it out the building, but his hearing had long since turned into empty ringing. He watched rather than heard as the castle they’d domineered turned into nothing but rubble, it wasn’t enough of a distraction to not remind him of how lonely he was with only Morgana as company.
That is, until two solid hands landed on his shoulders. He didn’t even bother questioning how someone had managed to sneak up on him.

Glancing to his side, a flash of black, a cocky grin, the pearly whites of Sakamoto’s teeth shone red under the light of the blackened sky.

To his other, a crashing wave of red, and yet another cocky grin, much more reserved than the first.

Just below him, cradled in his arms, was Morgana, holding Kamoshida’s treasure.

Together, they walked towards the exit, away from a hectic chapter of their lives.

“Okay…” Takamaki began, once the ringing in all their ears had stopped, “Just one question.”

They stepped into the real world. The silence that it brought with it was almost deafening compared to the sound of a castle collapsing in on itself.

Morgana hummed in response, far too busy cradling their bounty to walk, let alone converse; or walk on his own, for that matter.

“What the hell, just happened?”

Sakamoto fell to his knees, laughing.

Akira fell beside him, exhausted, Takamaki on the other, though she was laughing now too.

*Why are city people so weird…* He asked before falling unconscious, right there in an alley.

**Chapter End Notes**

Hey guys. Going on another "forced vacation" for a week, so I won’t be updating until at least past a week in August.  
Thanks for all the birthday wishes.  
Please leave a comment if there’s anything you want added or any critique you have or whatever, means a lot. :)  
I think this chapter was pretty weak, but I'm glad we finally got Ann in here lmao
Redeeming Qualities

Something restarted inside of him, someone pushing a button that reignited his consciousness, and
the first thing that he felt was a burning, numbing sensation that pulsed painfully in tune with his
heartbeat. The second sensation that he recognized was a ghastly wail of metal scratching upon
metal, it echoed across the walls and deep into his ears, the loudness of the noise enough to
jumpstart his body, crushing any semblance of lethargy his brain had left.

With a violent, body-consuming twitch, Akira sprung forward, his eyes opening and was instantly
blinded by the violent assault of artificial light buzzing painfully from above.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” As the words were spoken, a heavy, unexpected grip settled into the
crook of his elbow, the binding, however, only lasted as long as it took his instincts to pull out of it.

His heart was hammering against his chest again, though he couldn’t explain why. He was at a
train station, not at home, nowhere near home. He knew that, he did.

“Joker!” Another, more recognizable voice called out. Akira adjusted his vision, away from the
blinding effect of the ceiling and towards the more familiar flooring tiles of Shibuya station.
Sandwiched between his legs, which were tingling painfully now that he was awake, lie Morgana,
in his more feline-esque form, though his eyes still held the same brilliant, intelligent gleam of a
human. He lifted his hand to place it on Morgana’s head, but froze midway when he spotted the
appearance of his own appendage.

Twisting his wrist, Akira noted the remainder of his shattered fingernails, blood weeping through
the newly formed lattice in a sickening pattern and releasing an equally disturbing aroma that cut
through the pungent smell of the station with ease. Two of them had been ripped clean off, leaving
only the clotted bed to end his fingers, whether that was to his fortune or not, he couldn’t tell; all of
his fingers burned equally.

“Joker?” Morgana inquired, sounding much more reserved. He glanced around his damaged hand,
towards his teammate. “Are you okay now? You kind of passed out right after we escaped, Ryuji
ended up carrying you to the station since you wouldn’t wake up.” He’d have to thank Sakamoto
later, then.

Akira nodded, and finally placed his damaged hand upon Morgana’s back and stroked lightly. The
cat didn’t even bother to protest like he had before, and instead, began to purr lightly, lowering
himself until Akira felt the weight of Morgana’s head press down onto his leg. He continued to pet
his teammate slowly, a slow, monotonous rhythm that started to calm even himself down, past the
screeching of trains and the stampede of bystanders around them.

His finger snagged, a spike of pain rippled up into his brain and shattered the calm he’d managed
to achieve within the second. Akira glanced down, past the thin trunk of Morgana’s neck and
towards the end of his fingers where his finger had caught on something, a white and blue
something. He removed his hand from Morgana’s back and plucked at it, curious, though wary.
Pulling at it only revealed more and more white and blue, wrapping around the cat’s neck and
dipping down through his ribcage, the rest of it concealed under his teammate’s prone form.

Morgana whined, as if in pain, and Akira pulled his fingers away from the bristles of black fur,
releasing the wrapping of white and blue along the way. He took the freedom to observe his still
injured fingers; they were still painful, and still weeping out small amounts of his blood between
the patchwork of his shattered fingernails. He wondered how something like that could even


happen. Lifting his other hand revealed that it had only been the one hand that had been injured, though his left was no less dirty than the right, regardless of injury.

“Yo, Ann!” A voice called out, somehow louder than the buzz of commuters and the squealing of trains. Akira turned his head and spotted Sakamoto, still in his school uniform, approaching through the small opening between the wall and the aisle of suit-wearing people. His teammate’s face disappeared from view when even more adults began pouring through, disrupting the flow of traffic and filling the already packed space to the absolute brim; but just as quickly as the room filled, it was once again nearing empty as more trains were loaded.

Sakamoto approached, walked just a step past him and leaned against the wall above him. Akira watched the blond’s face, taking in the poorly concealed emotions as Sakamoto observed the sea of people swimming through the station. Disgust and annoyance lingered on his face for a long time, visible even through the flashes of yellow that beamed from the train’s headlights, creating endless shadows cascading on the blond’s face.

“We did it, huh?” Sakamoto said, finally looking down at him.

The look, nor the smile that accompanied it, lasted long before it was interrupted by another chiming in, “Finally?”

Akira glanced to his left and took in the seated form of Takamaki, the girl from his class, who had dragged him away to save herself, this girl was the same one who had not only awakened a persona and burnt Kamoshida’s eyes out of his skull right afterwards, promising to murder him. He wasn’t sure how he should be acting around her. Scared? She didn’t look intimidating, not in her school uniform, with her elbows digging into her knees. Not with her wide blue eyes, not as wide as Morgana’s really, staring between him and Sakamoto with a very intense expression.

Was she the one who had grabbed onto him when he had woken up? It had to be. There wasn’t much room, exactly, for someone to approach where he was squeezed between the bench Takamaki was sitting on and the pillar Sakamoto was leaning against. Not without alarming Morgana, at least; not that the cat was his personal security for strangers grabbing him, or anything similar.

“So the rumors were true, then…” Takamaki muttered, bringing him back to the fact that they were, mostly, having a conversation, now that Sakamoto had returned.

“Drink?” Sakamoto poised instead of replying, two sweating bottles were lifted, hovering in front of his face and towards Takamaki.

“Are either of them diet?” The blonde asked, not seeming to mind that Sakamoto was avoiding her questioning.

“Nope.” Takamaki sighed, but grabbed at one of the bottles, something bright orange with equally bright font that was smothered by long, pale fingers.

“Thanks.” Takamaki said, followed by the hiss of the drink opening.

“Here, dude.” He recognized Sakamoto’s voice, and he recognized the words, but it took him several moments to realize that they were, in fact, directed at him and the context of the phrase. In that, admittedly, long and awkward moment, the drink had been pushed even closer towards him, until he could feel where it was cooling down the air around it.

Using his non-injured hand, Akira reached up and clasped onto the base of the drink, pulling into
his possession. A quick, obligatory sign worked its way through his body; his hand chopping over the other, a lowering of his upper body.

Why was he so awkward?

“That means ‘thank you’.” Takamaki supplied, much to his mortification. He had taught her the same sign days ago. It felt like a lifetime since then; how did she even remember such an interaction?

Much like Kamoshida’s, his face wrapped in flame pretty quickly. Only his eyes remained, unfortunately, intact, and was able to watch Sakamoto’s reaction; first confusion, then awkward realization. Everything was awkward, he had made everything awkward; again. That, if anything, was one of his few special skills, as well as finding other persona users, it seemed.

“Anyways,” Takamaki started, drawing his attention from the stewing embarrassment that was still lashing at his cheeks. “Can you three please explain what just happened in that castle? What happened to Kamoshida? What did you mean that you could change his heart and what was with that weird note you posted all over the school?” The questions fired off, one after the other to the point that he ended up blocking his classmate out before he could forget any of her questions before he could even think up a response.

Morgana stirred within his lap, his small weight disappearing entirely to stand tall, as tall as a cat could anyway, between his legs.


“And why can the cat talk?!” She hissed quietly, leaning closer to them to keep her words out of unnecessary ears. She stared at Morgana, skeptical, and perhaps even a little frightened, not that he could tell, exactly, what Takamaki was feeling, he barely knew her and each time he had seen her, the blonde had looked quite a bit frazzled.

“Should I tell her, Joker?” Morgana queried, turning towards him with a graceful twist of his neck. Again, Akira blinked, confused, wondering why it was up to him if Takamaki knew or not.

He shrugged in response.

It didn’t matter now if someone knew what they’d been up to, what they worked hard to not only achieve, but keep a secret as well.

If Morgana’s information had been correct, Kamoshida would become a good person, his heart now weighed with guilt instead of arrogance from his actions. Shujin Academy would become a normal school where he could peacefully live out his second year of high school, as well as his probation. Nothing should go wrong, anymore, not as bad as they had been, anyway.

“W-well,” Morgana began, stammering as if he’d been put on the spot, and not by his own volunteering, “I was exploring Kamoshida’s castle, the world inside of his heart, and I was investigating something within the palace that would help me restore my original form, but I was captured before I could investigate anything. Kamoshida began to torture me…” Morgana trailed off awkwardly. The silence lasted an inordinate amount of time, the atmosphere unpleasantly heavy.

It seemed they had all been pinned under Kamoshida’s thumb, one way or another.

Using his uninjured fingers, Akira stroked down his right cheek. The skin prickled in agony, even with the lightest touch. He wouldn’t have to look to know that it was severely bruised; Kamoshida
had smacked him quite a few times, and given his dominating physique, it seemed inevitable. He couldn’t bare to think about what other things Kamoshida’s hands would have done if it wasn’t for their actions today. If they stopped him at all, that is. Though Morgana was quite certain about the results of their intervention.

“Then these two discovered me—n-not that I was actually in danger, or anything, I was just about hatch my own escape plan when these two knuckleheads came running past.” Morgana preened, his fur coated chest puffing out proudly with his own embellishments.

He took a glance over at Sakamoto. The blond’s jaw was clenched, and was glaring at the sentient being between his legs.

Another voice called from between his ears, an infinitely deep chuckle resounding within his mind. “What robustness!” Arsene mused. Akira found himself agreeing, though it seemed ironic, that the cat had the largest ego of the three of them.

“So it wasn’t real?” Takamaki asked, interrupting Morgana’s myriad of compliments towards himself.

Beside him, Sakamoto sighed, sliding down the wall until he was nearly the same height as Akira. “It was… mostly real, I guess.” The blond explained, scratching at his scalp with both hands, making it hard for even Akira to hear, as close as he was. “That world is like, inside of his head and showed… what was inside of his heart. How he thought of himself and the people around him, the bastard.” Sakamoto seemed calmer now that their mission was over, Kamoshida’s presence no longer a storm cloud over the blond’s life, even without the change of heart that was supposed to happen.

“Inside of his heart…” Takamaki echoed quietly.

“Yeah,” Sakamoto confirmed, “The way he viewed the school, the world, everyone was so fucked up that he made that world inside of him, and destroying him—well, the thing he saw himself as, was the only way to fix him. Or that’s how Morgana explained it anyway.” He finished, a shrug rolling through his shoulders as he finished his explanation.

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that, Ryuji, but that pretty much sums it up, Lady Ann.” Morgana agreed. Sakamoto rolled his eyes.

“So he should be like, a normal teacher now?”

Morgana hummed quietly, “If his heart wasn’t too distorted, then he should become a better person, yes.”

Beside him, Takamaki straightened up, “A-and what happens if his heart was too distorted?”

Morgana winced, “U-um, there is a chance that he could lose all desires… like eating, sleeping… breathing.”

Takamaki gasped softly, “H-he could die?” She whispered loudly, leaning down again to hiss in Morgana’s face.

His teammate wilted under the remark, oozing down into a black and white puddle under Takamaki’s intense gaze, “U-um, it’s a small chance, b-but yes, Kamoshida could die if he can’t handle the lack of distortions and change in desires.” The cat was practically squeaking every word out as the look in Takamaki’s eyes only grew more and more intense.
“Didn’t you want him to die anyway, Ann?” Sakamoto posed, breaking the dangerous atmosphere that Takamaki was crushing Morgana with. The blonde reeled back, another gasp tumbling from her lips, “I-I didn’t mean it… Nobody deserves to die like that, not even Kamoshida…”

Sakamoto hummed apathetically.

“M-more importantly, what were those things, that monster that came out of me, and that fire? How did I make those?” Slowly, Takamaki’s hands twisted until her palms were facing upwards. Naturally, no fire spawned between her fingertips, even as the girl grunted in effort.

“Yeah, that was—“ Sakamoto began, only to be interrupted.

“That was your persona, Lady Ann.” Morgana piped in, his previous humbleness brought to an end with the chance of being able to explain something; an activity the cat seemed to fair.

“Persona…” Takamaki mumbled, staring towards her still unlit hands.

“It’s your will of rebellion manifested.”

“It’s why your clothes changed, and why you can set people on fire, apparently.” Sakamoto tacked on.

“Hmm,” Takamaki hummed, before giggling quietly, “I barely recognized you, Ryuji, though your voice kind of gave it away. Kurikki-kun, I didn’t realize it was you at all until you passed out on top of us.”

Kurikki… Was this girl ever going to get his name right? Was it a joke? She seemed amused, though genuine. It wasn’t even the same incorrect name from last time…

“…Kurikki?” Sakamoto queried, his brown eyes blinking owlishly when Akira glanced over at him.

“That’s his name, right? I thought that’s what Kawakami-sensei said the other day, but…”

The corner they’d all squeezed into went fairly quiet, considering the location.

“A-anyway,” Takamaki started after a long, pregnant silence. “Maybe we should... introduce ourselves then?”

“I am Morgana!” Morgana called out, puffing up once again, all but climbing into Takamaki’s lap.

“The talking cat…” Takamaki mused, reaching down and commandeering his teammate.

“I’m not a cat!” He hissed, though it was quickly soothed when Takamaki took the initiative, and began scratching under the cat’s chin. Morgana purred loudly.

“I’m Ryuji, obviously, and you already knew that, Takamaki.” Sakamoto greeted sarcastically.

“Maybe you… changed your name, or something—besides, this isn’t about you, Sakamoto!” Ann screeched back, lifting an accusatory finger to point at the blond.

A reflective glimmer interrupted his attempt at deciphering whatever relationship his teammate and classmate had together.

Peering towards Takamaki’s lap, where Morgana was perched and preening, Akira was finally able
to take note of the remainder of whatever had been wrapped around Morgana’s neck. The blue and white ribbon laced downward and downwards, more than scraping the cat’s feet with what was hanging as the medallion of the jewelry; it was obviously meant for a human neck. A circular chunk of gold gleamed into his eyes again.

Hesitantly, Akira raised his fingers to clasp onto it, keeping the pendulum from swinging further. An encrusted angel lie upon the surface, equally as golden but with shadows and highlights that smooth metal couldn’t produce. Five, perfectly even circles overlapped above the wingspan of the decorated angel.

Expensive... was his final appraisal. He was fairly certain someone like him, broken fingernails or not, should not be touching something this valuable. Akira quickly removed his fingers from the piece, allowing the pendant to sway slightly, sending reflective beams into the empty space in front of it.

“Oh, yeah, what is that thing?” Ann asked, her own, much less damaged, fingers wrapping around the medal with ease. “Morgana had it in his mouth when we got out of there.”

“It’s the treasure!” Morgana quipped, as if it were all quite obvious.

“But it was a crown earlier!” Sakamoto snapped, reaching over him to snatch at the medal and Morgana with it. The cat tumbled back into his lap, a sudden, unexpected weight that caused him to wince, though it didn’t really hurt.

“Wasn’t Kamoshida an Olympic medalist?” Takamaki asked, trying to retrieve the treasure once again, though Sakamoto just smacked her hand away each time it approached.

“That asshole never shuts up about it, but is this really the real deal? How did we get it if we were only inside of his head?” That was a good question, actually.

They all turned towards Morgana.

“W-well, the castle was inside of his head, right?” Akira nodded, made sense so far, except how it related to the very expensive medal that was currently wrapped around his little feline neck, “So the distortions caused the castle.” Did Morgana not just say that? Regardless, he nodded in affirmation once again.

“But what caused the distortions?”

Ah. He realized. Yet another question that was out of his area of expertise as a high school student.

“The medal?” Sakamoto supplied, sounding as lost as Akira felt at the moment.

“I believe so,” Morgana confirmed, much to his surprise, “It’s kind of like, this medal resembles another time for him, when he felt he was really important, and he wants to feel that way all the time, but then… he can’t feel that way, so he had to make sure that he did. What I mean is, his heart grew distorted because he wanted to feel important, like he did when he probably won this medal.”

“…Why does hearing that make me feel like... an asshole?”

Takamaki snorted, “That’s called empathy, Ryuji. You know what that’s like, don’t you? To be good at something, and have it all crumble into nothing? Only instead of dying his hair, Kamoshida…” Her gulp was audible, even in the loud train station. Additionally, Akira could practically hear her thoughts and concerns.
Takamaki hadn’t seen that room, but she had seen what Kamoshida thought of her. *Wanted* from her. The blonde had watched an exact copy of herself get bitten in half; he wondered how she was still okay after that, or if all still felt like a dream, like the first time that he and Sakamoto had ventured into the Metaverse.

“I’m *nothing* like that asshole!” Sakamoto barked, his casual demeanor shattering as the blond took to his feet.

“R-Ryuji,” Takamaki all but whispered, “I didn’t mean it like that, I swear!”

Sakamoto had already stormed off, his form lost among the endless line of passengers.

Beside him, Takamaki sighed, and also stood, “I should go apologize… I’m such an idiot.”

Akira remained silent.

“I still didn’t catch your name, by the way.” She pointed out, though the mood for introductions had long since went up in ashes.

He felt around his pockets for his phone, but before he could work it out of his pocket, Morgana began speaking.

“His name is Akira, but I just call him Joker!” He was quite tempted to just abandon the conversation, to walk away much like Sakamoto had done not moments ago.

“A— Akira?!” Takamaki squeaked out before he could offer his family name. Stupid cat.

“Err, r-right, I’ll just be going then!” His classmate offered, “It was nice meeting you, Morgana, Akira.”

His cheeks, not for the first time, singed in embarrassment, and wished, not for the first time, that the floor would just swallow him whole and he could live as one of the subway people instead of dealing with this situation.

Unfortunately, no such thing happened.
Looking outside the window, Akira watched as the streamline view of Tokyo’s train system began to fill with water. Thick sheets of moisture cascaded down over the city’s streets, the train car was not excluded in this, and produced an endless metallic thumping as thin rivers of water carved down the transparent walls of the subway. Leaning his head upwards, he was able to make out the grey sky rippling past as he was propelled towards Yongen station.

It was not celebratory weather, yet he could feel a strange sort of calm wash over him as if the train weren’t forming a protective layer from the atmosphere outside. It was, unfortunately, not something he could say that he experience often; this serenity. He knew, however, that his issues were not complete, he was still on probation—still a criminal, after all. There would always be opposition for him for those who knew about his record, there would always be enemies before him. Yet today, he had managed to take down a formidable wall that seemed unclimbable.

Kamoshida was not a good person, he knew that. Someone who abuses their power did not deserve to have said power, he knew that.

Then why? Why did he feel such guilt over what had transpired today? Why was he worried Kamoshida, and not just having caused his death?

Morgana had all but assured them that the chances of Kamoshida actually dying were quite low, yet he continued to relive that same moment over and over again. Kamoshida’s eyeless sockets staring blindly towards him, the smell of burnt flesh still sharp and pungent, even in his memory, his apology.

Today did not feel like a victory.

Then again... The other time that he had tried to save someone, a single person, had not felt this way either, though he knew it was right, that he was right. Why did being right, being just, not fill him jubilation. Why couldn’t he feel the joy he thought was appropriate for the moment?

On the bright side, he wouldn’t be arrested for doing the right thing, not unless Kamoshida somehow retained any knowledge of the events that had taken place in his heart. An impossible task if Morgana’s information held true.

The train stopped and he stepped onto the platform, a stone stage covered by an identical stone roof barely taller than the train. Water continued to splash down noisily outside of the platform’s cover, small rivers flowed down the sharp edges of the concrete colored roof, creating a curtain between the two realms.

Real life seemed so far away.

Without an umbrella, he didn’t particularly feel like taking the scenic route, and with Morgana silently dozing within his only protection from the spring storm, it looked like he’d have to run for it. He tried to shake off the weariness from spending a morning of panicking and an afternoon of fighting; both equally tiring tribulations that he’d somehow managed to see through, but left him with barely enough energy to drag his feet towards LeBlanc, let alone dash through the rising sea level of the alleyways.
He stepped forward, into the static of the rain, into the sensation of being alive, and so, so wet. Just under his arm, Morgana yelped, startling into consciousness. Akira kicked himself a little. He should have made sure the cat was more covered before deciding to waltz into the rain; the cat was sitting on his notes, after all.

He tried his best to march forward at a reasonable pace, but with the water soaking into the already dense material of his uniform, as well as his shoes, he barely managed to dredge along the uncovered streets of Yongen-Jaya.

The heaviness in his feet, from both water and exhaustion, took its toll on his timing, but he, eventually, made it under LeBlanc’s verdant awning, a slight, though ultimately useless, protection against the downfall that had overtaken the city.

Even the bell that rang out whenever the café’s door opened sounded dull to his ears.

Sakura-san, as if learning from the last awkward experience they’d shared, looked up as he took a step into the café, his feet squeaking noisily in the hushed atmosphere of Café LeBlanc.

“You’re wet.” Sakura-san’s gruff voice announced, as if Akira, himself hadn’t realized the fact, even as small droplets slivered down his glasses and nose and plopped noisily on the tile beneath his feet. They, too, looked more dull than usual, as if mimicking the sky and turning a boring shade of grey.

“Heads upstairs, the café is still open.” Was the next thing out of Sakura-san’s mouth, more than enough instruction for him to excuse himself from the awkward silence that was starting to ring in his ears.

Each step was harder than the last, knowing that he was that much closer to the salvation of sleep. The dropping of his feet was accompanied by the annoying squelching of wet leather; he couldn’t wait to take these shoes off.

The stairs proved to be an unnecessary challenge in his path, and he almost decided to crawl up them but figured it would just make the café needlessly wet, and it most likely be him that had to dry up said moisture when the café finally closed.

The scent of brewing coffee did nothing for his fatigue when he finally made it to the attic’s landing.

“Finally!” Morgana wept, leaping out of his school bag before Akira had the chance to put it down, the shifting weight almost knocked him over. He stared dully down at his teammate, wondering the best way to go about warning him about the nudity that was about to occur without digging his phone out of the pants currently glued to his legs.

Whirling his finger in a circle, he pointed towards the bed, and unceremoniously shed off the blazer of his school uniform. The black, heavy material plopped onto the floorboards with a loud squelch. He didn’t attempt to undress any further until Morgana, who seemed to sense what was about to occur, strode over to the couch, not the bed, and settled into the worn cushions like a stain. His face, thankfully, pointed away from him.

He wondered, briefly, if other people had the same anxieties about their pet watching them change, or if that was exclusively to those who could speak, though, aside from parrots, he couldn’t think of many pieces of evidence that would prove or disprove either theory. Maybe it was just him that was the strange one.
His dress shirt, though considerably less heavy, made an equally disturbing sound as it joined his blazer on the ground. His glasses followed, bouncing a little on the wet mass of his uniform.

Carefully, or as carefully as he could, he untied his shoes and flipped them upside down, the feetholes pointed towards the darkening floorboards; it wouldn’t do to have his shoes moist for longer than necessary.

His socks and trousers joined the pile unceremoniously and a chill whisked over his exposed skin despite the considerably warmer atmosphere LeBlanc provided compared to the outdoors.

In his underwear, a temporary fixture as well, he kneeled before his box of belongings and wriggled his hands through it, seeking but not finding.

His parents had neglected to send a towel along with his clothes.

Somehow, he doubted that they knew about the bathhouse right across the alleyway, yet found himself unable to comprehend the pang of sadness that reeled his stomach towards his throat.

Improvising, he grabbed onto a t-shirt and began wiping down his arms and shoulders, wicking the dust and moisture away from his skin and pretending that he didn’t recognize the specks of marble flooring and gilded statues as they were wiped onto his impromptu towel.

There’s no point in worrying about it now… He attempted to convince himself. Somehow, Kamoshida’s downfall only felt like the first patch of snow in the avalanche of his life, though, even that wasn’t true. Kamoshida wasn’t his first difficulty, wouldn’t be his last, yet as he wiped his face clean, all he could imagine were singed, empty eye sockets, piercing into him as Kamoshida’s very human, very real hand reeled back again and again. His face rang out above the dull aches that were storming across his body, uncomfortable in the exhaustion that was coiling around each nerve ending, begging for him to finally succumb.

He didn’t bother attempting to wipe down his hair, it was too damp for the shirt he was currently using and wasting another one would be wasting a valuable resource—he wasn’t sure how much doing laundry would be, but considering it was the city, he wasn’t inclined to find out soon.

Carefully, he slipped on the next shirt in the small pile, making sure to avoid over soaking the back as his head slipped through the bottom; he doubted even moist shirt would keep him from falling asleep though.

Next came underwear and sweatpants, then he was finally ready to fall into the coma his body had been craving.

The sound of the blanket seemed to have been signal enough for Morgana that he had finished changing, and the cat pounced into the bed with little fanfare before they both were wrapped in the still cold comforter.

The rain fizzled into white noise, and finally into nothing.

“Hey!” Something—someone thundered, shattering the darkness that had held him stable. His body jerked forward, toppling a weight that had been on his chest and sending it into his lap with a yelp that was muted by the thundering of his heart.

“Jeez—“ The thunder sighed, infinitely softer now. Turning his head, Akira spotted Sakura-san across the space of the attic, his form mostly in shadow due to the dim lighting from the ceiling and looking, almost entirely, like something from a nightmare.
His heart continued to pound, thumping painfully in his chest and sending flares of pain up into his throat.

“Anyways,” Sakura-san began, advancing until he was now nothing but a shadowy tower, a position that sent tremors spiraling from his spine into his hands. “One of my customers saw you come in earlier—the doctor from yesterday.” His shoulders tensed, and he attempted to gauge the darkened lines of Sakura-san’s face to no avail.

“She said you were looking like crap, and told me—well, ordered me to give you this. She’s kind of a bossy one; weird though.” Sakura-san extended his hand, and, shaking, Akira received it into his palm. A cylindrical bottle. He had the same one under his bed. “It’s supposed to help with whatever happened to your face.” Sakura-san’s voice shifted into something darker, angrier at the mention of his face and Akira felt the urge to cover it up instantly, shame starting to well up within him like cement. His caretaker extended his other hand, it was cold to the touch and the plastic crinkled noisily as it was exchanged.

“I.. don’t want to know, it’s none of my business, but if you’re getting in fights at school and kicked out, no other school is going to take you, that is if you don’t end up in prison first. Didn’t I tell you to keep your head down?” The words were quiet, but filled him shame.

And anger.

He had kept his head down, tried his best to maintain a low profile.

Kamoshida still came after him, still slammed into his face as if he had started a revolt against the man as opposed to just went to class and went home. He was still hated, still ostracized. Still talked about, even as he kept his gaze down to the floor.

Akira had kept his head down, and it hadn’t worked.

Not that he expected Sakura-san to understand or to listen.

Instead of looking for something to write with, he simply nodding, doing his best to look abashed, though that was exactly how he felt.

Sighing, Sakura-san continued to speak, “She also said you were looking a little thin, not sure how she could tell that when she only saw you for a minute…” Sakura-san shrugged, obscuring more light for a moment. “Well, whatever, she’s the doctor, not me—I left some of my curry in the microwave, make sure you eat all of it. But don’t get any ideas, from now on you’re making your own meals down there, got it?”

Confused, and still tired, Akira found himself nodding without realizing it.

“If you can’t find anything that you like, then you better get a job.”

More nodding. In his lap, the lump of weight twisting into a small pillar with piercing blue eyes, “Hey! What about me, huh? What am I supposed to eat?” Morgana shouted, frustration causing his ears to flick back and forth.

Sakura-san’s attentions shifted instantly, “Did I wake you, kitty?” The older man asked softly, teasing.

“I’m not a cat!” Morgana whined indignantly, yet made no move to escape as Sakura-san’s hands found their way into his very cat-like fur.
“Just… don’t burn down the kitchen, I’ll kick you out if I even smell a fire, got it?” Sakura-san warned, his tone and face hard while his fingers continue to roam behind Morgana’s ears and under his chin.

Warning received, Akira nodded.

He didn’t know much about cooking and wasn’t really sure if taking unnessessary risk was something he’d do in pursuit of culinary knowledge. It was better not to risk it.

“And make sure you clean up after yourself, and that includes up here, I don’t want any of the smell to get to my customers.”

Again, he nodded, despite Sakura-san’s eyes not even being trained on him any longer.

With nothing left to say, Sakura-san’s presence made the room quiet, save for the endearing purring that Morgana was producing under his caretaker’s attentions, that, and the still hammering rain from just beyond the attic’s window.

Eventually though, Morgana’s purrs drifted into nothing as Sakura-san took his leave.

“Joker?” Morgana asked moments after the café’s door slammed shut.

Akira shifted his stare from the floor and towards his teammate.

“Are you feeling alright?” He wasn’t sure how he was feeling, actually, the terror of the abrupt awakening had faded into nothing and the anger and shame he felt had been filtered out.

He felt tired, but also felt nothing at all.

Akira nodded, unsure what else to convey.

He wanted to sleep, to continue where he had left off, but instead found himself settling his feet into the cold floorboards of the café; slowly, he pushed the medicine that Sakura-san had left with him under the bed, with the rest of the stuff and returned to a standing position. Slightly addled, he wobbled as he took to his feet, but it faltered before he crossed the attic.

Lowering down to the floor, he picked his uniform up, making sure his phone and glasses were removed, and slung the still dripping fabric over the edge of the stairwell. They’d still be wrinkled when they dried, but at least they’d be presentable enough for him to wear. Fortunately, tomorrow was Sunday and he’d have enough time between now and Monday to figure out what to do with his uniform.

Taking his phone, and his glasses, he drifted back towards the bed in the attic’s corner and slid back under the still warm fabric. Pressing the pack of ice that his caretaker had given him to his face, he could almost say that he felt relaxed.

There were several notifications, and not all of them were from Sakamoto, which he supposed should worry him, but only served to lit him aflame in anticipation.

That flame, however, dissolved into nothing when he didn’t recognize the number that had caused them.

“Hey, I just wanted to thank you for today.” Did they have the wrong number?

“It’s Ann by the way” Sakamoto had called Takamaki that. He doubted the name was common,
even in Tokyo, given the fact that he had never heard of it before.

“Ryuji gave me your number, I hope you don’t mind haha” He sort of minded, it was mostly
the disappointment of it all though.

He’d been in Tokyo for almost an entire week, and his parents hadn’t bothered to text or call him
once.

Should I respond? Given, there wasn’t much to respond to. It would be quite strange to mention
that he’d been hoping that she was one or both of his parents, even weirder to say that he did, in
fact, mind the small breech in privacy. What did one say to a stranger who didn’t know his name
but knew about his criminal record, as well as the Metaverse?

He supposed he could ask why she and Sakamoto were using each other’s given names. Then
again, that seemed more like a Sakamoto based question.

Speaking of…

Ignoring Takamaki’s texts, he opened the chat application that he and Sakamoto shared.

“We did it!!”

“You feeling better, dude?”

“Make sure you wrap your hand, broken nails get infected easily”

“Heads up, Takamaki asked for your number and I went ahead and gave it to her, is that
cool?”

“When is the change of heart going to happen? Does Morgana know?”

Thankfully, there were more options for him to engage in conversation with Sakamoto than there
were with Takamaki.

“Thank you for carrying me to the station.” He sent instead of replying to any of the questions
the blond had posed. It was, after all, the polite thing to do.

Scrolling up a bit, he extended the screen in front of Morgana’s face. After a moment, the cat
strolled around his extended arm and sat down next to him, his body’s excess heat pouring into the
side of his stomach, heating him unevenly, but quite pleasantly.

“The effects should be quite immediate. You should definitely see effects by the next time you see
Kamoshida.” Using one hand, he relayed the information, a rather slow affair considering he was
using his non-dominant hand.

The reply was, once again, near immediate.

“Cool”

“It’s gonna be weird having him be like, normal”

“You know?”

Akira did, in fact, not know. Teachers had always treated him differently, whether it was kinder or
stricter, how a teacher acted around another, less disabled, student, was not a gauge for how they
would treat him.

It was odd to consider though, how Kamoshida, after a single weekend, would go from an abusive teacher to a relatively average individual; no longer the king, but just another employee of Shujin Academy.

Would Kamoshida apologize to him in person?

He had a rough outline of what the born again teacher would be like, not perverted, but that was almost it. What was Kamoshida like behind the mask, or crown, of a king?

Akira didn’t know the answer.

“I think so.” He responded.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Sakamoto asked next.

*He is nosy!* It was all but confirmed now.

What was he doing tomorrow, besides waiting for his uniform to dry? His first day off since moving. Would Sakura-san even allow him to leave the café? It wasn’t like he was contractually obligated to remain under house arrest, but that didn’t mean Sakura-san didn’t have the final say on if he was allowed to continue living here.

“If you’re free, want to hang out?” Akira stared at the message, unblinking, trying to decipher the symbols before him.

*Hang out?* He pondered the possibility.

“Ryuji wants to hang out?” Morgana queried, his neck extended enough to read the glowing letters that displayed exactly that information. “Will Lady Ann be there?” He asked next.

He was confused by the message still. Someone wanting to hang out with him was an interesting development. Nobody at his old school had offered before, and the awkwardness that went along with him asking someone was unbearable to consider, let alone perform. Simply put, Akira could say that he has never hanged out with someone.

“Why?” He questioned, rather to the point. Sakamoto didn’t know JSL, and that would mean a lot of time just sitting there, waiting, while he typed a response to any non-yes-or-no question. What if Sakamoto just got tired of reading what he typed and left? Would that put an end to their rather tentative partnership? Besides, Kamoshida was dealt with, it’s not like they needed to maintain contact, not unless any of the other teachers suddenly developed palaces, something he doubted.

“Ann asked me to ask you.” That answered that question.

“Not that I don’t want to hang with you, you seem like a cool dude.”

“Come on!”

Hesitant to issue a response without knowing what Sakura-san would say about his disappearance, Akira simply turned his phone off and plugged it in.

For the second time that evening, he got out of bed, deserting the heat of the past few hours as well as the icepack, and walked down the stairs. The urge to use the bathroom became an undeniable urge by the time he reached the bottom. Quickly, he turned into the bathroom, shutting the door on
Morgana’s confused callings from the attic’s landing.

After taking care of that urge, and washing his hands, Akira exited the bathroom feeling less tense, and, for some reason, more at ease.

Morgana was parked right outside of the door as soon as he opened it.

“Joker!” Akira, stepping around his teammate, continued on his path into the kitchen. Just as Sakura-san had said, there was a rather massive, almost unsightly, plate, though he could argue it was more of a platter, of curry behind the microwave’s door, along with some rice. The smell was pungent, having stewed in the microwave for who knows how long.

The plate was surprisingly heavy, though he should have expected it, given the size of the portion, and, admittedly, his hands were straining a bit by the time he managed to bring it over to the café’s counter.

Morgana skirted away, gasping, “Boss expects you to eat a-all of this?” The cat questioned skeptically, his small paw batting at the edge of the overflowing plate, coating the pads of his feet in thick curry, aromatic curry.

Instead of wiping or flicking it off, the cat began to lick at his appendage, his curled, pink tongue wrapping around his foot eagerly. An appreciate moan filled the café.

“Delicious!” He purred.

While he was happy enough that Morgana enjoyed his meal, he still wasn’t sure if curry or rice was safe for feline consumption.

It’s not like there’s anything else for him though… He didn’t have a job, and doubted that he’d be able to find one before his probation ended.

Sighing, Akira grabbed a spoon from dishrack next to the sink, which was clear of dishes, and carefully portioned off a segment of the feast for Morgana to consume, careful not to let any of the meal slide off of the edge of the plate. He didn’t want to have to do any unneeded cleaning; probably the reason he wouldn’t get hired to any job, aside from his record.

The curry, same as the previous times that he had had it, was delicious. A mixture of savory and sweet. The taste was too much for his tongue, though, and his stomach signaled that he was already quite full before he managed to make a dent in either the curry or the rice accompanying it. He just hoped Morgana fared better than he did, lest Sakura-san feel the need to lecture him again, or speak to that doctor about his health. She already knew too much.

Unfortunately, between the two of them, and after several silent minutes, they weren’t able to complete the dish, nor did they manage to clear enough space in it to see the bottom of it. Did Sakura-san really expect them, or just him, rather, to actually finish any of it?

Bloated, he stared down at the still massive serving, unsure of what he should do with the leftovers.

Peeking into the refrigerator proved that the dish wouldn’t fit between any of the already cramped shelves. Putting it back in the microwave would all but tell the next person to open it that he had just ignored the order to eat.

His deliberating was cut short by a painful lurch in his stomach, making him hyperaware of the rapid, damp chill that was creeping up his arms and chest.
The rapidly accelerating sense of vertigo disintegrated his equilibrium as he stumbled towards the café’s bathroom.

Within the small, tiled restroom of Café LeBlanc, he learned that the walls were quite acoustic as the sound of his own retching fumbled into his already pulsing ears.

Thick streams of acidic mashed up food discharged from his mouth, splashing into the toilet noisily and turning the water below into a rusty brown hue. Sweat dribbled down his forehead, over his nose, and into the putrid water as well. Torrent after torrent of his stomach contents kept his body constricted over the bowl, the aromatic essence of LeBlanc’s curry scorched his esophagus on the way back up, leaving him docile, even as a sudden voice called out to him from behind.

Wiping streaks and lumps away from his lips, he flicked them into the toilet bowl, and flushed the repulsive scent away in a refreshing gurgle of water. Finally, Akira turned towards Morgana, who had, obviously, followed him into the bathroom.

The cat’s blue eyes were sculpted downwards, forming slants out of the usually bright irises. He hadn’t seen that particular expression on Morgana before, even in his Metaverse form.

He jumped up onto the counter when Akira began to wash his hands, a softer lilt filtered through his teammate’s voice.

“Are you okay, Joker?” Morgana had asked that same questions several times since they’d met, not that he could put a particular number on said instances. Somehow, though, it came off more endearing than when Sakamoto had asked him the same question. It was less confusing, though, Morgana needed him to get fed when Sakura-san wasn’t around, so it was natural that the cat would be keeping an eye on him. Sakamoto, now that Kamoshida was officially dealt with, had no such excuse.

Akira nodded towards his teammate, not really paying the cat much attention as he dried his hands off with paper towels.

Morgana followed him into the café, and he was too tired to bother worrying about having the cat leave evidence that he’d been in a place where Sakura-san had strictly told the cat to go.

With his newfound exhaustion, he found that he didn’t particularly care where he put the leftovers, and into the microwave they went.

Locking the café’s door, but not turning off the lights, Akira advanced up the stairs, gathering his small bag of hygiene products and returning to the restroom. The smell of his own vomit was still quite strong, and he flushed the toilet again before he started to brush his teeth.

The smell and effect of the acid lingering in his mouth was only amplified by the minty freshness of the toothpaste, leaving a numbing, nearly painful burn that started in his mouth and settled into his nose by the time he finished.

Bending over the sink, Akira scooped his hands under the steaming current and splashed piping hot water in between the curls on his scalp. Using only the water and the pads of his fingers, he attempted to cleanse his hair of both debris and the sweat that had built up during the day. By the time the water underneath his dipping hair had begun to run clean, his scalp was burning and sensitive to the touch.

Drying off with even more paper towels, he gathered the supplies that he had brought down and turned off the café’s lights before returning to the attic.
He found that he didn’t mind the dampness his hair added to the pillow when his head finally collided with it. It was refreshing, in a way, and cooling to his warm scalp.

In the dark, Morgana’s form was unnoticeable, but Akira felt the mattress dip as the cat finally joined him on the bed, as well as the subsequent, albeit smaller, depressions as the cat strode further up the bed, right next to his chest before finally wilting into a small puddle of shadow.

Akira placed a hand on top of his teammate, only this time, it was for his own benefit.

Comfortable, he lost consciousness before he could consider it further.

A sound, loud like thunder, startled him into wakefulness; the second interrupted slumber in a single night.

Flicking his eyes open and meeting the near endless expanse of solid, grey concrete sent a spine-chilling shiver up his spine, making him all the more aware of not only the lack of blanket, but the absence of Morgana as well. Sitting up, he couldn’t find a trace of the cat, only empty space between his stripe-clad legs.

Mindful of the heavy, clumsy weight around his ankle, Akira swept his legs across the side of the bed, and strode towards the foreboding caged door of the Velvet Room. The room had remained exactly the same as the last time he had been here; his two wardens were still in the same place at either side of his prison door, Igor, behind his massive desk, remained seated, with the same sinister grin that framed his exposed teeth.

“First off, I’d like to begin by congratulating you, trickster.” Came Igor’s voice, perfectly clear even from across the expanse of the prison.

One of the wardens turned from their post to look up at him through the bars, “To think our master would give words of praise.” Justice commented, her single, golden eye opened widely. She observed him, and Akira felt it almost like a physical sensation, a phantom touch that roamed over him, considering; Igor’s words must truly meant something to these two.

The other warden swiveled on her heel, breaking the uncomfortable tension of Justine’s gaze with a glare from her own, singular eye; the same color as Justine’s, “You better treasure this moment, inmate!”

“You have encountered a new ally, one who shares your aesthetics, and has, no doubt, helped you accomplish your goal.” Igor continued, adjusting the tuft of fabric in the pocket of his suit. “Now, your rehabilitation may truly begin.”

Rehabilitation... Igor had mentioned that before.

“It seems now would be an appropriate time for me to explain,” The man leaned back in his chair, but the same, steady gaze continued to pin him down, “You have a special potential. However, that must be refined into a useful power. It is weak now, but refining it shall grant you strength to stand against the coming ruin.”

Ruin. Igor had mentioned that as well. He supposed he should feel encouraged, knowing that he had the power to prevent ruin, whatever that entailed, but Akira only felt more confused; more in the dark than he had before. Igor’s explanation, a term he would use loosely, told him next to nothing about the ruin that was to come. Only that he had the power to prevent it.

Isn’t it over? They had beaten Kamoshida. Sent him away to repent. Wasn’t the ruin stood against already? Surely Igor didn’t mean something else? Another castle; another distorted soul?
“The power within you had grown,” Igor mentions, cryptic as ever, “It would seem that yet another contract has been formed, and your heart is steadily gaining the power of opposition. It would seem the progress of your rehabilitation is going well; you continue to impress me, trickster.”

Akira wonders if he should feel humbled by the man’s words, instead of further confused; his two wardens certainly seemed to think so, judging by their reactions.

“For your progress, I will now present you with a reward: a strengthening of our contract. I’m sure you will find it most useful.” A sudden burst of euphoria washed over him, clouding the pounding ache within his head, airing a fog of calm within him; the same sensation he’d had at the station, only magnified, infinitely more intense.

“This may be presumptuous of us,” Justine chimes in, shattering the sensation, “but we have words of wisdom to share as well.”

Caroline takes over the tangent without signal, and Akira turns to her when she begins speaking instead of her partner, “When you’re out in reality, you better hone your relationships with those you have contracts with!”

“Spending time with those people… will lead to the cultivation of your relationships with them.” Justine continues, “That is a source of power to evade the ruin that our master has mentioned.”

Akira stills, attempting to absorb the cryptic information.

“The time has come. Return to your brief moments of rest.” Justine offers, before the velvet room crashes into a swirl of muted colors that fades to black; his time in the Velvet Room was over.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a review; critique, ideas, just saying hi, what have you.
Akira jerks awake. His hand is burning, his legs and arms are sore, his backseizes while his stomach contracts. The peaceful nature of the rest, and even the ominous, underwater feeling that the Velvet Room provides, are both suddenly shattered into nothing. Lying on the floor, unseen and unfamiliar. He untangles his arms from underneath the comforter and pushes them towards the ceiling; each of his joints pops noisily, gunshots within the previously silent attic that has him smelling blood instead of coffee. Staring as flesh melts off of a terror-stricken face instead of the book-cluttered desk that sits opposite of the bed.

Swallowing, he sweeps his legs over the bed and tucks his ears between his knees, suddenly nauseous.

Focusing on the sound of his own pulse rattling in his ears, Akira tries to calm himself, to escape these illusions that are suddenly coaxing him.

This is his punishment.

Fortunately, his stomach had remained empty through the night, and even as he retched silently towards the attic’s floorboards, nothing seeped out except for a gleaming strand of spittle. Using the back of his hand, Akira wiped away the spit away, leaving no evidence, but the flaring pain that had deceived him into wakefulness remained. Invisible; but by no means absent. Undetectable to nobody but him, a secret for him to keep.

The bed shifted next to him, but no apparent movement could be seen from the corner of his eye.

Was LeBlanc haunted?

A gaunt, ivory snout glided over the edge, giving way to an oceanic orb to flicker silent at him.

Ominous, but not haunted. He’d nearly forgotten that Morgana had been here through the night. A cat would be much more sensitive to ghosts than him, anyway; surely Morgana would inform him if he saw anything. At least he hoped that was the case.

Then again, it wasn’t like he opened up to the cat about his strange dreams that seemed to correlate, or even take place within, the Metaverse. Unless he already knew about it; unless Morgana, Sakamoto, and now Takamaki all had similar dreams revolving around the Velvet Room. He’d have to ask.

“Joker?” Morgana piped up finally. Akira leaned back a little, just enough to stare at the tip of Morgana’s nose without his neck cramping.

“Are you okay?” Was asked yet again.

*Maybe Morgana is the nosy one.* He’d owe Sakamoto an apology if that was the case.

Bent over himself, his entire body feeling like it was dying, though that pain was now numbing more and more with each moment he spent awake, Akira found himself nodding in response. He was fine, or would be, which was the same thing as being okay now. He leaned further back, slowly and fluidly until he was seated on the edge of the bed, staring into the abyss of forgotten
items within LeBlanc’s attic instead of towards his feet.

Remaining still, he considered his dream, wondering yet again if Morgana, as well as his classmates, shared this fate, if they too had been told that Kamoshida’s change of heart wasn’t their only goal.

I should just ask… Yet, even when he glanced between the bed and shelving unit, where his phone was still off, but charging, he felt no motivation, no drive, to actually pick it up. It was, for now, only a glorified mirror, one with a glowing light and a cord hanging from it, but a mirror nevertheless.

A minute passed, then another, maybe even a few more. He couldn’t tell, too wrapped up in his own thoughts, yet not recalling any of them except for the deepest well that seemed to threaten to spill over; a cup that was too full and only keeping together by the strongest tension. He could not, for the life of him, draw a conclusion on this feeling. Akira knew, instinctually, that it would not go away, no matter how much he distracted himself with trivial matters, like finding a job, like finding a bargain on kitty litter, or even school. Ruin was coming. He just wished he knew what ruin looked like.

With a huff of warm air, he found himself standing, prickling raveled down into his toes, and wondered when he’d gotten so dramatic, as well as paranoid. He supposed the threat of prison, in his mind or not, was starting to wear on him, as it would anyone.

Ruin isn’t coming… Everything is fine! Perfect. Dandy. It all seemed like a lie, a mask to be worn even from his deepest self, his true self.

 Arsene snorted from within him, accompanied by the rattling of chains, but remained ominously silent besides that. He almost misses the snide comments, but knows that the ease with which they communicate is what he truly craves; neither signing nor even lifting his hands, and his persona can understand him.

Turning, Akira bends down towards the floor, and snags his phone by its closest corner, disconnecting the charger and letting it fall into a small coil on the ground. A moment of loading and the mirror warps into a glorified wristwatch, which tells him the time, later than he would wake for school, but not late enough for the café to close. Then the device vibrates, then again, and a dozen more times, obscuring the clock into nothingness, and leaving block after block of notifications that he hadn’t anticipated in the slightest.

Two people had the ability to contact him, yet his phone continued to buzz.

He considered turning it back off.

“Is that a no?”

“Dude?”

“Hello?”

“Whatever, night man”

“You make up your mind yet?”

“We’re going to Big Bang Burger around 1200”
“Bring the cat, also”

He’d never heard of Big Bang Burger, nor did he know where it was. He did draw one conclusion, however, Sakamoto was definitely the nosier one between him and Morgana.

Unsure what to do with this information, he exited out of Sakamoto’s message chain, and, with reluctance, opened Takamaki’s. Unlike Sakamoto’s, Takamaki had sent few messages, which were concise, and to the point; a transparency he rather appreciated. No subtext, or if there was, it went completely over his head, a definite possibility.

“I want to talk about what happened yesterday.”

“What’s even the point of talking…? What happened happened, what will happen will still happen. There was no point in bothering to talk about it, or be talked at while they talked about it.

Sitting back on the edge of the makeshift bed, Akira swept his tongue over his teeth, taking the sleep-spawned film of plaque away from them. He didn’t want to go, yet, there was an unshakable sensation inside of him, like a string tugging him in a single, cardinal direction.

Reaching into the box that held his belongings, he pulled out an outfit, bundled it under his arm, grabbed his hygiene items, as well as his glasses, and, with a sigh, descended into the café bathroom. Morgana called after him, his codename rattling across the floorboards of the attic.

The café, from the glimpse that he’d stolen before shutting himself within LeBlanc’s bathroom, was empty, save for Sakura-san, who was, as Akira had almost seen him, lingering behind the counter. If that older man had heard him, or Morgana for that matter, he made no sign of acknowledging him before Akira entered the bathroom.

Locked away from the open design of the café’s attic, he could now hear himself breathing, the slight whistling of his nose that railed off the tiled walls. He was, for all intents and purposes, alone; away from both Sakura-san and Morgana, though he knew both of them to be mere meters away. Maybe even close in Morgana’s case, but he couldn’t be sure.

Alone, with his thoughts, and personas, Akira felt secure enough, because safe was never the right word, to let excess fabric flow off of him. Once the thick, double-knot of his sleep pants were undone, the only thing holding the fabric against gravity was his grip on the strings. Releasing that grip, the fabric pooled, a whoosh of fabric, that bundled right at his ankles along with his underwear; there wasn’t enough friction, even with the elastic band, to keep them straddled on him without help.

Bending over at the waist, the shirt all but slid towards his underarms, desperate to be off of him. Clawing at the roll that formed over his shoulder blades, Akira tugged off the last of his clothing. Leaving him exposed only for his own observation.
Very little had changed, of course. It hadn’t been an extraordinary length of time since the last time he’d been naked, after all, but it was the first time, in quite a while, where he was alone, just him, and the ominous voices in his head.

LeBlanc’s bathroom did have a mirror, not a full body one though, just a vanity mirror that allowed him to view from the crown of his head down to just below his nipples; leaving the rest of his observations to take place in first person. His upper half, though, he could easily see as if it were another person. The dark, shadowy lines of his collarbones jutting out almost obscenely from his chest. Ridge after ridge flowing down his chest like braces. He looked unnatural; disgusting. Visible now, just for him, just in this moment, though. He could cover himself, will cover himself.

Pulling on his fresh clothes, Akira takes another look in the mirror. The lines are gone, replaced with endless, dark fabric; it almost looks good, picturesque, except for the remaining visible part of him.

He bends over the rushing stream of water, letting it run between his fingers as the steam rises up towards his face. The heat warms the chill he didn’t know he was experiencing, enhances his sense of self for brief moments as it runs between the lines of his scalp, whisking grease and residual pieces of shattered marble with it.

Unfolding his glasses, Akira pushes them up his nose, finally obscuring the patches of darkened skin around his eyes, and hiding parts of the blossoming purple and yellow that remain tender under the thick frames.

He alternates between squeezing the water from his hair and brushing his teeth, exchanging hands whenever the urge takes him until he’s mouth feels clean and his hair is only mostly damp.

Tugging on underwear and pants, Akira secures both garments with a thin belt that digs into his waist, keeping him decent as he exits the café’s bathroom with a different bundle of fabric under his arm.

Sakura-san’s voice doesn’t call out to him as he exits the enclosure, nor when he advances on the stairs. He’s not sure what make of it, out of the, admittedly limited, experiences he’s had so far with Sakura-san, the man seems quite keen.

Maybe he just doesn’t care. That would make his next mission—of asking permission, a simple one. Hopefully, he’d get a simple yes or no, and nothing else.

Even with that in mind, Akira lingered at the top of the landing, staring down at his feet, and as a result, Morgana as the cat strode forward, questions bouncing off of his whiskers that he couldn’t hear through the ringing in his ears.

He laced up his shoes, stuffed his phone into a pocket, and breathed out slowly.

He could do this.

With his feet covered in more than just skin, he found it that much harder to actually sneak down the café’s stairs, each step thudded noisily and some of them squeaked just as loudly. The rundown ambience did nothing to help his confidence or his already pounding chest.

Lurking in the outskirts of the café, where there was no seating and the bathroom was just a step away, Akira took in Sakura-san, as well as the café; which was devoid of customers.

He stepped forward, finally, taking careful steps forward until he was standing at the opposite end of the counter as Sakura-san. The older man looked up when he finally arrived, an irritated, and
perhaps compulsory, twitch of his eyebrows served as a greeting.

“You eat?” Sakura-san asked, flipping over a page in whatever book he was browsing.

Taking refuge on one of the stools, Akira shook his head, just a little bit; though it was more than enough to cause a rapturous sigh to spring forth from Sakura-san.

He hitched a thumb backwards, “Curry. Rice. Don’t make a mess.”

Akira nodded, sliding off the edge of the stool and made his way behind the counter, keeping his gaze low as he collected a plate. Inside of the kitchenette, a punch of spices and smells wafted into his senses, a spike of sensation that made his stomach tense up uncomfortably. Sure, LeBlanc always smelled of coffee and curry, but being this close to the source, made him feel nauseous all over again. He swallowed whatever emptiness that was threatening to climb up his throat, and, carefully, scooped a portion of both curry and rice.

Quickly, he backed away from the overpowering scent, bringing only a fraction of it back with him as he reclaimed his spot at the counter.

Sakura-san didn’t look up as he did this, nor when he accidentally clanked his spoon against the plate, sending his heart into palpitations as the noise recoiled across the empty café.

He swallowed mindlessly, trying not to focus on the obscure weight that slid down his throat and into his stomach. He could feel his insides swelling, already at capacity before he’d finished what he had served himself.

Hopefully, Sakura-san wouldn’t be offended if the last portion of his meal went down the sink. His caretaker, thankfully, decide to look up when he finally made his way over to the kitchen’s sink and swiftly swept down the remainder of his breakfast into the swirling stream of water.

Taking his time, he washed the two dishes that he had used, rinsing them twice, just in case, and finally, after his hands had turned warm and slightly pruned, he washed his hands, and turned off the water.

With no more distractions, he had little choice.

He approaches the counter.

“Why don’t you get rid of all that crap upstairs? That room needs a good cleaning.” Sakura-san suggests, though, by now, it’s more of a threat than anything.

Akira nods, again, and finds himself back upstairs before he’d even considered another possibility. 

Coward. He chastises, moving his hanging uniform a little to the left.

Morgana’s voice suddenly calls out, “Joker!” He jumps a little, just as Morgana himself pounces onto the table, just beside his still damp schoolbag, he moves that a little to the left as well.

He twists around, leans against the table and takes in the attic, takes in the mess. There’s a lot of it, but he’s not exactly sure what’s crap and what’s salvageable, or what Sakura-san cares about at all, if anything.

He probably should have asked.

He starts small, with the bookcase next to his bed, taking down volume after volume of water-
ruined novels, all of the words within are blended into smears of black and grey. Nothing is salvageable, and he wonders if any of these pages would be worth recycling. He piles them by the stairs, careful to keep the growing, slightly damp, piles away from the attic’s staircase, just in case any customers get the wrong idea.

The room feels bigger with the books removed and the bookcase empty, though it did knock up a bunch of dust into the already musty air. On the bright side, he now has this entire bookcase; he’s not sure what to put on it, except maybe his phone, but only when it’s charging. For now, that is the only thing placed on its large space.

“You’re cleaning this place?” Morgana questions, now perched upon the precarious pile of discarded books. Akira nods, and turns around to continue just that, but just as he’s about to take a step forward, a shadow streaks by, right under the path of his foot. He recoils, and manages to catch his balance before he falls over, but is more concerned with Morgana, apparently, the shadow, who was bouncing on top of yet another pile of books, this one perched on top of the desk across from his bed.

“Clean this one next!” Morgana orders, though it’s more of a plea.

He shrugs, it would happen either now or later, and he had to admit, Morgana’s enthusiasm was, at least, intriguing.

The books, much thicker than the tomes that had been on the book case, were also ruined with time. Those two were piled by the staircase, resulting in yet another small mountain of expired paper with no destination.

Morgana pounced back onto the desk once the last pile of books had been removed.

“Excellent!” He all but purred, “Once you finish cleaning this dump, I can teach you something invaluable for a maturing phantom thief!” The statement was punctuated with a small, fiendish chuckle; the only kind of laugh that Morgana seemed to produce.

It was odd, having Morgana just casually mention phantom thievery, like he’d knew, without the doubt or hesitation that Akira himself was experiencing, that they would be continuing with their escapades. It was unnerving, but also invigorating, in a way. Finally, something during his stay in Tokyo would remain constant; even if that thing was morally questionable and probably illegal.

He simply nodded in response to Morgana’s small rant, however, not exactly bothered to question any of the information he’d just been dumped with.

They were still being phantom thieves.

That was alright.

The ease of the realization was equally disrupted with the unease of meeting with Sakamoto and Takamaki. He doubted that the first would need much convincing to continue, they had both made a deal with Morgana, after all; but Takamaki? Would she be on board, fixing twisted desires and fighting shadows? In his limited experiences with the girl, one of the most poignant being her final act of mercy towards Kamoshida, had left him with a vague impression of how she would take the news.

*She has a persona, though…* Morgana had said that only those with strong rebellions could obtain a persona, with Kamoshida edging out of the picture, who’s to say that hers, and even Sakamoto’s, personas even stay?
“A mighty strong one at that!” Arsene pointed out, helpful as always, as he rummaged through moldy boxes and broken miniature appliances. This task would be easier than he thought, nearly everything in the attic was worthy of being in the trash, save for a few, newer looking items that he tucked carefully in the small corner of the attic, away from the main space of the room.

Within an hour, he had managed to pile all of the garbage at the edge of the landing, right near the staircase, leaving the rest of the attic rather neat, but infinitely dustier than when he had started.

“Joker, look!” Morgana’s voice comes from the edge of a flowerpot made of twigs weaved together, sprouting, rather limply, from the inside of the pot, is a dull, wrist-thin expanse of mottled bark. Where the flower pot is about as tall as Morgana is, the tree, though he used that definition rather hesitantly, stood just as tall as he did, even while devoid of life.

He forces a curious expression, though he is genuinely confused about his roommate’s sudden interest. The remnants of a tree wouldn’t be useful for anything aside from a scratching post.

“It’s alive!” Morgana exclaims, though the tree looks dead, very much so, “Why don’t you decorate with it?”

He’s not an expert in trees, or nature of any sort really, and he figures if he was going to be living with Morgana as his roommate for the next year, the cat had just as much say on the interior as he did. If he wanted a dead tree in their living space, who was he to stop him, besides being the only roommate with hands.

Gently, he slid the foliage from the edge of the staircase towards the more habitable part of the room, the flowerpot eventually finding rest on the far end of the still-empty bookcase, a trail of black, chalky soil littering a path to its new resting place. The tree’s branches swayed pitifully, rocking back and forth slowly until they settled for a barely noticeable vibration as it settled into its new home.

“You know,” Morgana comments, striding through the trail of dilapidated soil, “Even a dreary room can be brightened up with a little bit of green foliage, so let’s take care of this plant so it won’t dry up and wither away.”

Too late… Akira commented to nobody but himself, and Arsene as well, he supposed, as he used the edge of his shoe to sweep paw-printed soil into a small pile near the edge of broken-appliances and damaged books. Morgana seemed pleased with the addition, or lack of subtraction rather, so he’d let the tree stay, though he had no idea where he’d get new soil or nutrients for the thing; let alone where he’d get the money to buy those things.

Stepping away from the tree, Akira walks over to the corner of the room, where he’d stacked the appliances and pulls out a rather ancient feather duster, as well as a hand-sized broom and dustpan.

Quickly, he fell into the actions of cleaning the large space, watching as his arm lifted to pull down clumps of spider webs, but not feeling the stretching of his arms, nor the pressure in his knees as he sweeps up everything that had fallen from the ceiling. While his body exerted itself with dusting and sweeping, his brain seemed to slow further and further down, as if it were being soaked in an ice bath; one without escape.

The feeling didn’t fade, even as he took in the now clean space.

The stairs groaned noisily, shattering the calm that his reformed living space had thrust upon him. Turning away from the scene, he watched as the top of Sakura-san’s hat glided into the rest of him, until he formed a complete person standing at the edge of the attic, observing the space with a stern
“So you were really cleaning up here, huh?” Sakura-san doesn’t look towards him, so he doesn’t bother nodding or shrugging his shoulders, “Well, it’s only natural that you’d want to keep a clean room, anyway.”

The older man cleared his throat, a disturbing hacking sound that echoed off of the walls, then gestured with one hand towards the large pile of books and scraps of metal, “You can take those books to the dumpster down the street. It’s to the left outside of the café, just walk a little and you should see it. Understand?” His caretaker questioned, looking towards him for the first time.

Akira nodded.

“The other stuff, take it to the man up the street, the other way, he runs a repair shop. Ask if he can repair them; if not just throw it away. It’s all garbage anyway.” Sakura-san nodded to himself, then, as quickly as he had come up, he melted down the stairs, only to reemerge a moment later, “There’s a hand-cart down here that I use for the shop that you can use, just don’t get in the way of any customers, got it?”

He nodded once more, and Sakura-san sunk back down the stairs.

“Sorry I can’t help you, Joker—but when I get my body back, I’ll make it up to you!” Morgana promised, lingering on top of the pile of trash he’d worked up.

Akira moved towards his teammate, and gave him a soft pat on the head instead of responding; a sign of his appreciation, or he hoped it came off that way, at least.

Hoisting an armload of books into his already sore arms, he blindly carried them down the café’s stairs and drops them at the bottom, hoping that his body wouldn’t collapse on him just yet; he was already feeling the effects of lethargy in his muscles, and had to push himself to get the next load down the stairs before he felt close to passing out.

“H-hey, kid!” A voice barked. Seconds later, he turned around, keeping a grip on the banister as he did so. “Why don’t you take a break, it’s about time for lunch anyway.” Sakura-san ordered from behind the counter after glancing at the watch wrapped around his wrist.

Akira shrugged, twisted himself on the stairs and descended the three steps that had almost broken him. Carefully, he took a seat at the empty counter, the same one that he’d had breakfast at that morning.

He rested his arm on the counter, and his head fell onto the curved appendage on reflex. The exhaustion that had been lingering within him spread out until it was pulling at the edge of his skin from deep inside.

A loud clatter jerked his eyes open, though he wasn’t sure when they had even closed. The sound is quickly followed by the pervasive scent of fresh food.

“Lunch.” A voice—Sakura-san’s, explains from right above him.

Slowly, Akira sits up and sure enough, there is a plate of rice and curry under him, as well as a handled cup with steam billowing out of it. The liquid within is too dark to be tea, and too warm to be carbonated.

Coffee… He realizes, feeling stupid.
He looks up, towards Sakura-san, who is still lingering over him, and bows over the plate, just a bit. Sakura-san snorts loudly, and shuffles away, to the other side of the counter where a customer was now sitting.

A painful jerk deep inside of his stomach pulls his attention away from the meal and his gaze falls upon the still steaming coffee cup.

Liquids were easier to swallow, anyway.

Pulling it towards him, Akira sticks his nose over the rim of the mug, unable to pull any memories of actually consuming coffee beforehand. The smell is, undoubtedly, an interesting one; not fragrant like tea, but there is something in there. A part of him is interested in drinking it, but the hot steam trickling up from the cup makes him pause; he finishes as much of the meal as he can without drinking until his stomach starts to compress painfully inside of him, not quelled in the slightest despite the fullness pushing his stomach towards his skin. The pain of his contracting insides, however, replaces the lethargy that was weighing down each of his muscles, and he finds that standing up doesn’t seem as impossible as it would have minutes ago.

Akira scraps what’s left on his plate down the sink and the still steaming cup of coffee that Sakura-san had given him. Wasting it made him feel guilty, and the way he went about it made the experience even worse. All the same, Akira turns around and bows his thanks to Sakura-san before retreating.

Morgana is waiting for him when he climbs back up the stairs, his face contorted and at odds with the relaxed posture he has taken under a rare beam of sunlight that has imprinted itself onto the attic’s floorboards.

Akira waves in greeting, a small flicking of his wrist and Morgana pushes himself to his feet.

“What took so long? Is the dumpster really that far away?” His roommate questions loudly.

His fingers fold in, “I was—“ Akira stops himself, pushes his hands into his pockets and walks towards the nearly empty bookcase to retrieve his phone. On his way back to the patch of sunlight where Morgana remains, he types out his response.

“Sakura-san made me take a break.” He explains, bending over to put the screen in front of Morgana’s face.

“Hm.” Morgana responds, “I see.”

Morgana doesn’t say anything else, only spills back onto the floor in a black and white puddle. The conversation appears to be over. Akira pockets his phone and pulls himself back into a standing position, and walks over to the garbage pile to rend another stack of books.

The hand cart is waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs, just out of the way so he doesn’t trip on it, already piled with the books that he’d brought down.

He glances around.

Sakura-san is still behind the counter, chatting with the customer that had come in when he was at the counter in quiet tones. Another couple, both with wispy, silver hair is seated near the front of the café, facing towards the back of the café, but not looking in his direction. A booth closer, someone with black hair, long for a man or short for a woman, is seated.

He returns back upstairs, bringing down another armful of books, then another; until the pile is
only broken appliances and scrap metal, and the cart is almost buckling under the weight of the small fortress of pages.

Picking up the handle, he walks forward, only for his elbow to recoil in resistance. The cart doesn’t budge. He sighs, then turns around, sinks his shoes into tiles of Café LeBlanc, contorts both hands to squeeze into the awkwardly sized handle and pull. Unlike his previous attempt, the cart does move, only a few centimeters closer to the exit than it had been.

A pulls again, using everything his body and the handle’s leverage has to offer him, until finally the cart is rolling towards the exit. The customers, thankfully, stay seated as he does this, and he can keep his eyes clench closed as he tugs the gargantuan weight towards the café’s only exit. His vision being blocked, however, does nothing to veil his ears from the comments of the customers to Sakura-san as he brings the cart by; banter slinging around him as his body threatens to snap. His cheeks are burning both exertion and embarrassment by the time he reaches the far end of the café, thin layers of sweat trickling down his forehead and chest, as well as building up on his neck and underarms.

Making it outside of the café is almost enough to make him feel accomplished, until he remembers that just outside of the door is not his destination, but the dumpster down the road.

The street has a much rougher texture than that of the café, but is fortunately tilted enough in his direction that the wheels almost move on their own, almost enough for the cart to knock into his heels with each step that he takes. Additionally, being outside makes the sweating situation even worse, and by the time he makes it to the fenced in dumpster that Sakura-san was walking about, his shirt, socks, and pants are sticking to his skin uncomfortably.

It would be sunny when I have to do something like this, he complains, taking his frustration out on the books as he lobs them into the large dumpster, each tome creating echoing, metallic thumps until he’s on the last one; he doesn’t bother throwing the last one in, instead he tilts it over the edge of the container and finally walks away from the dumpster, hand cart squeaking peacefully behind him.

More comments fire through the air as he returns to the café, soft-spoken praises and reprimands on his lack of strength that are accompanied by the ringing of the door’s bell. Unsure of what to do, he ignores the comments, doing his best to look unbothered but not unhospitable.

“He’s just shy.” Akira hears Sakura-san explain as he escapes up the stairs.

Morgana looks up again when he returns to the attic, “You’re wet!” He exclaims, stepping forward as he bends over to pick up a broken set of burners. They are, fortunately, not as heavy as their metallic outside leads him to believe, and he disappears down the stairs once more.

The second time he crosses the café with the cart, there are no comments on his presence, nor his lack of strength. The only sound accompanying his journey is that of his heaving lungs, as well as the café’s door, jingly cheerfully as he takes his leave.

The street, unfortunately, isn’t in his favor as he tugs the cart towards the right, the wheels threatening to slip down the subtle slope of Yongen-Jaya each time he pauses for breath. Fortunately, the repair shop that Sakura-san mentioned isn’t a full block away before Akira is tugging the hand cart into the open-ended building, where there’s just enough room for him under the building’s lip for him to hide from the ever-rising sun.

His appearance draws the attention of the only person inside of the store, a shock of sparse, silver hair tilts backwards, looking up from a broken something to look right at him through a pair of
“Yes, can I help you?” The man asks drily, albeit politely; a rare occurrence since he’s come to Tokyo.

He pulls out his phone, but pauses when he hears the man scoff; glancing up, he finds that he is no longer under the man’s attention.

“Could you fix any of these?” He approaches the man, who had returned to tinkering with the backside of an electronic he couldn’t identify. The man jerks in his seat when Akira gets too close, and he takes a step back before lifting his arm up, dragging the message along with it until it’s perched in front of the man’s face, the glow of his screen reflecting off of his glasses.

“Huh? Uh—” The man mumbles quietly, leaning backwards and then forwards, and adjusting his spectacles until the lenses are brushing against his eyelashes. “Could you fix…”

The man sprouts suddenly, and shows off the spaces between his teeth where his teeth had begun to fall out. “What did you bring?” The man asks, through the folds of his wrinkled smile.

Akira turns around, gesturing to the cart of miscellaneous appliances that were weighing down the cart. The man navigates through the clutter that is blocking the store from having a concise walkway and kneels down before the cart.

“Burner… m’crowave… toaster oven… food processors.” The man stands up suddenly, and turns towards him. “You didn’t steal any of this stuff, did ya?”

Akira blinks, surprised, before he shakes his head.

Who would steal broken stuff and try to get it repaired? He wondered idly, looking around at the items inside of the shop without moving to actually observe them. A copious, even excessive, amount of broken appliances were scattered haphazardly around the small space, giving the impression of a painting, one of a cluttered closet that yearned for cleaning.

“Uh, none of this stuff looks fixable, but… I’ll buy it off of ya for spare parts. How’s that sound?” The man offers, pushing his hands behind his back.

He pauses, then nods. The old man smiles again, then turns back to the cart, humming quietly.

“How about two-thousand for all of it, quiet boy?” Again, Akira finds himself nodding, not knowing if that was a good deal or not, but not really caring; Sakura-san had called it all trash anyway.

The man digs into his pocket and pulls out a thick, folded wad of bills and begins flicking through them. Moments later, two green bills are hanging in front of him between two shaking fingers.

“How about two-thousand for all of it, quiet boy?” Again, Akira finds himself nodding, not knowing if that was a good deal or not, but not really caring; Sakura-san had called it all trash anyway.

The man digs into his pocket and pulls out a thick, folded wad of bills and begins flicking through them. Moments later, two green bills are hanging in front of him between two shaking fingers.

“Would you mind helping me unload? I’m old, you see.” The man asks. He shrugs, not exactly enthusiastic about doing any more lifting, but finds himself with his arms full seconds later.

“Any spot will do.” Are his only instructions before he’s left alone, standing with arms full of metal and no stable place to put it on. Carefully, he drops the pile next to a crate filled with wires, as well as the next one; by the time he goes back for a third load, the cart is already empty.

“Thanks for your business.” The man says casually, already navigating through the piles to get back to the project he’d been working on when Akira had arrived. He bows politely, though the man doesn’t even seem to realize that he’s still there, he makes towards the exit.
That was strange, he thinks, taking the handle of the hand cart.

The walk back to LeBlanc is unremarkable easy without the weight of a loaded cart behind him.

LeBlanc’s bell rings softly as he walks in, and attention is instantly drawn to him, yet no words are slung his way.

Feeling warm, he ducks his head down, dragging the squealing cart back towards the stairs and dropping it off before approaching the counter, not taking a seat and, instead, leaning on the counter with his still sweating arms. He digs into his pocket, pulls out his phone again, along with the two folds of paper and presses them towards the other side of the counter.

“The repair shop gave you this for your stuff” He explains when Sakura-san finally walks over. His caretaker looks down at the screen, then back at the bills, then finally right at him.

Akira looks away, towards the other end of the counter, his gaze locking onto a magazine rack.

“Keep it.” Sakura-san says, sliding the bills back towards him.

Akira gapes silently. What?

Sakura-san snorts once more, “Hard to believe someone like you…” The statement goes unfinished, and leaves him more than confused. The older man clears his throat, stepping away from him and towards the other end of the counter.

Akira picks up the two bills before he too, slides over, following his caretaker from the other end of the counter.

Now or never!

“Can I go to Shibuya to meet someone?” He asks.

Sakura-san looks down at the screen again, then down at him over the edge of his glasses. His expression is stern, then falters into uncaring.

“Whatever. Just don’t cause any trouble, got it?” Akira nods dutifully, bowing politely as he leans away from the counter and heads back upstairs.

“I’ll be there.” He finally responds, sending the message to both Sakamoto and Takamaki before he makes it to the attic.

Morgana, once again, looks up from the same place. “Joker!” He greets, mumbled by sleep; not bothering to stand this time.

He picks up his school bag, and pushes his hands inside, feeling the edges and seams with his fingers; the inside is cool to the touch but not damp, thankfully. He pulls out his notebooks, pens, and the dry-erase board and sets them on the table beside his upturned shoes.

Kneeling and turning, he pulls the bag open, offering it to his teammate. Who blinks at him, “We’re going somewhere?” Morgana asks, pulling himself to his feet, looking livelier with each second.

Akira nods, gesturing to the bag once more. Morgana walks over, stumbling until he leaps into the open container. He waits to lift until Morgana’s head is perched outside of the zipper, his chin spilling over slightly and his blue eyes still staring up at him. With care, he hoists the weight up,
storing it under his arm and ignoring the way it further pushes his still wet shirt into his chest.

Finally, he walks back down the café’s stairs and heads towards the exit without being stopped.

Taking a seat at the terminal, he pulls out his phone to check the time. At the same time, Morgana perks up, sprouting out of the bag like a haphazard plant.

“Where are we headed, Joker?” The cat wonders aloud.

“We’re meeting with Sakamoto and Takamaki.” He offers, drawing an exclamation from his teammate, but no response, otherwise.

He checks the time again when the train arrives, and concludes, that even as fast, and nauseating, as the Tokyo system is, there was no way he was getting to Shibuya by the time the other two had given him, causing an uneasy lurch to rumble in his stomach; he should have offered that information, yet when he found himself inside of Sakamoto’s text chain, he couldn’t find the right words, and, instead, said nothing about his imminent tardiness.

The feeling did not fade as he stepped off of the platform into Shibuya Square, where many, many people were swimming across the concrete, forming a blockade of intricate traffic that he found difficult to look at, let alone penetrate. With Morgana under his arm, unbalancing what inertia he retained, he found it difficult to keep up with the pace of the other civilians, with the addition of the bright sun reflecting off of every building, Akira found himself out of breath once more.

Big… Bang… Bright orange neon pulled his attention away from the surrounding bleak buildings that made up Shibuya’s shopping district. While his English wasn’t the best, he had a feeling that the last word was, of course, Burger.

Scooting further and further right, he was able to keep aligned to the flat storefronts, and when traffic finally allowed, Akira ducked into the hollowed-out opening of the restaurants entrance. Taking a moment to breath, he leaned against the outer wall, keeping out of the way as customers streamed in and out of the pair of sliding doors next to him; the smell of cooking food invading his senses with each opening. The smell was strong and artificial, enough to force uncomfortable pulses in his stomach as his body tried to repel any further contact with the establishment.

Akira checked the time and, as predicted, he was several minutes later than he’d been expected to arrive. Gnawing on his lip, he stepped into Big Bang Burger, where the smell only grew stronger and the noise grew louder, he hoped that Sakamoto and Takamaki were still here.

“Welcome to Big Bang Burger!” A girl announced as soon as he stepped into the doors, bowing quickly and politely. “Would you be interested in trying our Big Bang Challenge!?” She belted out over the noise, cupping her hands over her mouth.

He shook his head, bowing just as deeply before stepping away from the girl and further into the restaurant.

“Yo!” A distinct voice called out, followed by the screeching of chair on tile. Akira looked up, then around, and spots a blond man in the back corner, staring and waving at him.

“He looks different.” He finally notes after taking several seconds to identify the man as Sakamoto. Gone is the blazer from their school, replaced with loose, purple fabric.

Akira raises a hand, and tries his best to navigate smoothly through the cramped walkways of Big Bang Burger, made even more difficult with the wriggling bulge attached to his side.
“Took ya long enough.” Sakamoto reprimands as soon as he approaches the booth.

He finds himself bowing in front of his teammate, an apology for his tardiness; to which Sakamoto only scoffs, sounding very much like Sakura-san.

“It’s cool, bro, just sit down.” The blond instructs, gesturing to the small booth, where Takamaki is sitting against the wall, quietly looking up at him. She smiles at him, a sliver of white teeth peeking through glossy lips.

Without her uniform, Takamaki is even more noticeable, dressed and groomed well. More than enough to make him feel awkward and inadequate as he takes a seat next to Sakamoto, who sits directly across from Takamaki. Grabbing at the straps running over his shoulder, he hoists Morgana across the small gap between the table and the wall and sets the bag next to the girl.

Morgana immediately hops out of the opening in the bag and lands on the table across from him, nearly knocking into the trio of drink cups that occupy the center of the table.

“Ryuji.” Morgana greets, formal but not entirely unpleasant. Akira looks towards the boy beside him.

“Cat.” Sakamoto returns, smiling with only part of his mouth.

Morgana glares across the table, then turns towards the impromptu member of their team, his expression instantly softening, “Lady Ann.” He greets, causing the girl to blink rapidly.

“Er, nice to see you again—both of you.” She replies, offering Morgana a nod, then him.

“So whaddya wanna talk about, Taka—I mean, Ann?” Sakamoto asks, breaking through the quiet that threatens to spill onto the table. The blond reaches over, and snags one of the cups on the table.

“Um,” Takamaki starts, reaching for one of the two remaining cups. She plays with the straw for a moment before sticking it between her lips, but doesn’t take a sip. “I want to know why Kamoshida-sensei was—why I was there. A-and what that power was, her voice is still inside my head. What did you mean when you said you could change Kamoshida-sensei’s heart?” She asks slowly, though her voice grows louder as she speaks, to the point where Akira can hear her confusion, and anger, in each syllable.

“Lady Ann…” Morgana echoes, somber.

The table remains still, statuesque as Takamaki begins wiping at her eyes, “I—I want to understand, a-after the things that he did to Shiho, I- It’s my fault that she did that—that she…” Takamaki’s silent crying transforms into hiccupping gasps, ribbons of liquid arcing down her cheeks before she can catch them.

“Sorry, I’m just—“ She trails off.

“Ann…” Sakamoto speaks up, when Akira looks over, the blond’s eyebrows are pressed down, all but glaring at the girl across the table. He can hear Sakamoto’s leg bouncing wildly under the table with intense tempo.

“That shit wasn’t your fault,” He barks out, closed fist coming into contact with the table, shaking it, shaking them as well, just in a different way. “There wasn’t nothin’ you could do.” His tone is acid, even more so when he adds, “That any of us could do.”

“I should have protected Shiho.” She counters, watery blue turning fierce onto Sakamoto, who only
“G-guys…” Morgana interjects, his ears pressed back; a visible sign of how uncomfortable the situation has gotten. Akira adjusts the ends of his sleeves, as well as his collar, feeling like a child, rather than a participant in a conversation with his peers.

“…Whatever.” Sakamoto shrugs his shoulders.

Takamaki sighs, still wiping at her eyes as she looks over to their side of the table.

“Go on, Mona.” The boy next to him prods, picking up his cup and taking a long sip.

“W-well, when someone, like Kamoshida, has a strong desire, they can become twisted. When they become twisted, it changes that person’s heart. That’s when palaces begin to form in the Metaverse— that’s the place where we ended up yesterday.”

“Metaverse?” Takamaki interrupts.

“It’s like a world inside of people’s heads.” Sakamoto explains, crossing his arms.

“Exactly. Yesterday was the day we’d finally gotten through Kamoshida’s palace to confront him, and when you face the ruler of the palace, that’s how you change their heart, Lady Ann. But to do that, you need to be able to reject the ruler’s influence. That rebellion comes alive inside of you, that’s why you were able to summon your persona, that power inside of you.”

“She came from my rebellion?” Morgana nods. Takamaki looks down at her hands, where fire had spawned less than a day ago.

“So you beat him?” She asks, looking towards Sakamoto, “You changed his heart?”

The blond nods, “Beating up his shadow made him let go of that crap, right, Morgana?”

Again, Morgana nods, “How we handled it, you included, Lady Ann, he should retain all of his memories and desires, except for the distorted ones, and repent for his actions without risk of mental breakdown.”

“M-mental breakdown?” Takamaki exclaims, sitting up a little. “You mean like that train accident?” The blonde looks between the three of them, shock etching into her tear-stained features.

Sakamoto winces, “Kamoshida won’t kill anyone, he’ll just live the rest of his life knowing what a complete asshole he is… or was, I guess.”

Takamaki sighs loudly, slouching back down, “A fate worse than death…” She comments darkly.

Akira shudders, uncomfortable.

“Does that answer your questions, Lady Ann?” Takamaki nods stiffly, still not looking up from the table, the curls of her bright hair casting shadows down her features.

“Good, now it’s your turn to fulfill your end of our deal, all of you.” Morgana lifts up, parts of his body popping softly under his dark fur.

“D-deal?” Takamaki questions.

“Of course, I helped you take care of Kamoshida, now you all need to help me with my goal; I help
you, now you help me—It’s the honorable thing to do as a phantom thief!"

“Phantom thief? Like on that card, the thieves of hearts?” She asks, forcing nods from both Sakamoto and Morgana.

Takamaki crosses her arms across her chest, the metal across her wrists clinking noisily as she does so. “Well, what do you want?”

“I’ve lost most of my memories, as well as my true form, and I need help from other persona users to get them back.”

“True form?” Takamaki echoes, glancing between them again.

“Morgana is a human, or claims to be, anyway.” Sakamoto offers, causing an uproar from the feline in question.

“How is that fair?” She whines, “Do you even know a way to do that?”

Morgana’s ears wind back from their relaxed position, “Of course I do! The answers lie in the depths of Mementos… I think.”

“You think.” Sakamoto and Takamaki say at the same time, in the same voice.

Impressive… Akira observes.

Morgana backs up a step, “I don’t know! I lost my memories, remember!? Mementos is the only clue I have.”

“What even is Mementos, then?” Sakamoto chops out, gruff and annoyed; Akira hears the blond’s leg resume bouncing steadily.

“It’s the palace of everyone, the collective unconscious of this world…” He explains.

“The world…” Takamaki echoes.

“Please… I need to get my body back.” Morgana pleads.

The humans around him sigh in unison, and glance at each other, for once, their emotions aren’t written on their faces as Takamaki and Sakamoto stare at each other.

“Fine.” Sakamoto spits out, as if he hadn’t already agreed to Morgana’s deal at the same time he had.

“I’ll help too.” Takamaki answer, uncrossing her arms and using one to pet over Morgana’s face and neck.

Attention turns to him, three sets of eyes suddenly staring at him, making him clammy and uncomfortable in an instant.

“Joker?” Morgana prompts.

He nods as well.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long to update, like I said, uni starting and I've been a busy bitch.

Leave a review, let me know what you think and what not. I get lonely. :)

Takamaki and Sakamoto stood from their chairs, and Akira followed their movements as well, moving to the side to collect Morgana and his bag while the other two scooted away, though he could feel them lingering just behind him.

Shifting the added weight under his arm, he turned around to join the rest of the team, only to find them staring at him rather intently; enough to make him freeze in place.

**Did I do something?** He questioned silently, dragging his gaze over Takamaki’s face, then to Sakamoto’s. Nothing in their expression sparked resemblance inside of him.

Sakamoto lifted a finger and pointed towards the table they had just abandoned. “You forgot your drink,” He pointed out, a benign smile dragging his lips upwards.

“We didn’t know what you’d like, so we filled it with water, is that okay?” Takamaki questioned once he turned around once more and looked back at the table. As Sakamoto had stated, there was a cup there, sweating under the sunlight piercing through the windows.

**For me?** He considered. The cup was cool against his skin, and equally as moist; refreshing against the sudden spring heat. Once again, he turned around, careful not to swivel fast enough to have Morgana bump into him, and bowed slightly to his teammates.

Without waiting to see if they were following, Akira headed towards the door, bowing once again to the lady guarding the entrance.

“Have a space*tastic day!” She shouted cheerfully, as he walked between the automatic doors. Moving away from Big Bang Burger, he leaned against the closest wall and peered into the bag Morgana was in.

“Let’s go back to the station, you guys should be able to get in through there.” The cat advised, using a paw to point towards the street they’d used to get here. Nodding, he pulled the bag’s strap back onto his shoulder.

“The train station, he said?” A voice questioned, causing him, and subsequently Morgana, to jump in place. Swallowing reflexively, he looked up to see Takamaki and Sakamoto, who had obviously followed him out of the restaurant. He hadn’t seen them approach, however.

Akira nodded in reply, causing the other two to nod as well.

“Let’s go then!” Sakamoto cheered, twisting around and walking away. Takamaki followed after him, and he followed after her. The packed stream expanded around them, avoiding walking too closely to Sakamoto as he led the three of them towards the station. Whispers slithered past them, casting judgement on the three of them as they marched forward. The comments served to flush his already warm face, and he sipped at his water gratefully, thankful that he could keep his face down, hopefully preventing more judgement than he was already being subjected to.

The comments abruptly faded into nothing as Sakamoto led them around a corner. The ones that
had been talking about them continued forward, part of a larger crowd that assimilated back into a compact stream as soon as they had left.

It was a strange occurrence. Usually, with his head kept down, people rarely attempted to talk to him or made comments about him; though Tokyo was steadily breaking every expectation he’d had about people before he had moved. Nobody in Tokyo knew his name, except for his school, where everyone seemed to know not only his name, but the circumstances surrounding his sudden transfer; yet people that barely knew him still looked down on him in disgust, as if his criminal record was stapled to his face.

“Freakin’ assholes.” Was shouted from in front of him, only be shushed and quelled by Takamaki shoving her hand over Sakamoto’s still moving mouth, expletives no doubt turning into muffled yelling under her fingers.

“Ew!” Came another, more feminine, shout, presumably from Takamaki. The girl recoiled from Sakamoto, taking her hand with her but holding the appendage a steady distance away from her.

“You licked me!” She screeched before leaning forward and wiping the palm of her hand onto the purple of Sakamoto’s jacket. The blond did nothing to move away and a smug cackling was his only response.

“What’s the big deal, anyway?” Takamaki questions, stepping forward and leaning against the smooth wall of the closest business. Both he and Sakamoto follow, taking either side of their new teammate, though, where he is careful to keep a respectful distance between the two of them, Sakamoto all but leans into the blonde.

“Forreal? They were bad-mouthing all three of us, and you’re just gonna take it?” Sakamoto grumbles eventually. Around the curve of Takamaki’s cheek, Akira can make out Sakamoto’s angered expression, the same one he had adapted within moments of spotting Kamoshida’s castle. It was becoming a familiar enough sight for him to recognize it.

“It’s not like we’ll ever see them again anyway, Ryuji.” She responds.

Sakamoto leans back and his view of the blond is cut off unless he leans forward. He does not. The weight under his shoulder shifts, “I think Lady Ann is right, Ryuji. Besides, it’s a big disadvantage to us if you get hot-headed every time someone insults you.” Morgana pipes in, his voice following the appearance of his ears as they peer out of his school bag.

“I guess so.” The blond leans forward again, bringing a change in expression with it, “Aside, once we go to this Mementos thing, we can change the hearts of all shitty adults, right, Morgana?”

Just below him, Morgana nods slowly, “If their heart is twisted enough to cause minor distortion, we should be able to find them somewhere in Mementos; though it would be a lot easier if we had their name, without that we’ll be stuck looking until we stumble upon them. It’s like a palace in that aspect.”

Despite the information, Sakamoto growls in frustration.

“So we’re just supposed to learn the name of every shitty person on the planet?” The blond imposes.

Morgana doesn’t respond.

After a terse moment of silence, the four of them continue their way towards the entrance of the
station. This time, however, he is the one leading, somehow he had managed to position himself at
the front of their small pack and was trying not to freak out over the realization.

By the time the three of them were walking down the steps into the train station, he was out of
water and was sweating on the wrong side of profusely. He paused at the bottom of the endless
flight of the station’s steps, but continued in the same moment, the trample of shoes that much
closer as he scuttled towards a more secluded section of the station.

Chills pressed into his skin as he leaned against a vacant wall of the station, just around the corner
from where they had come in. Further on presented a dead end of yellow tape that stretched from
wall to wall in a neon web. He didn’t need to step closer to read what it said, the sinking feeling
inside of him told all he needed to know; which gave him enough confidence that nobody would
turn this corner to see the three of them surrounding a talking cat.

Sliding down the wall, he tugs the bag carrying Morgana off of his shoulder and carefully sets his
teammate on the floor between his legs. Almost immediately a pair of pointed ears jut out of the
bag, followed by the rest of his fur-coated body as he pounces out of his prison.

Akira doesn’t blame him.

Morgana looks around the secluded wing of Shibuya train station, then turns to them. There’s
something strange in Morgana’s eyes, though he can’t really seem to place the emotion or
expression.

“We can get in through here?” Takamaki clarifies, glancing around the empty hallway as Morgana
had done a moment ago.

Morgana nods, “And it’s out of the way, so nobody will notice when the three of you disappear,
nice thinking, Joker.” Under any other circumstances, Morgana’s statement would be creepy, yet
he finds his face warming again despite himself.

“So whadda we do? How do we get into the palace, then?” Sakamoto interjects, drawing his
attention away from Morgana’s strange expression and praise.

“Is your Meta-Nav open?” The cat countered.

Sakamoto cursed, and quickly shoved his hand into his pants pocket.

“Ready?” Morgana asked the moment Sakamoto pulled his phone into view.

“One sec.” The blond responded.

“Ready?” Morgana quipped as soon as Sakamoto responded.

“One sec!” Sakamoto repeated, fiercer this time; the smooth planes of his face twisting into a
scowl as he, presumably, pulls up the Meta-Nav.

“Ready.” He sighs out a moment later, “We just need a name and a place, right?”

“No, just enter exactly what I say,” Morgana commands, “The keyword is: Mementos.”

The skin on Sakamoto’s face pulls tighter together, “Huh? What’re you trying to pull?” He
questions, shaking his phone in Morgana’s direction.

“Just listen to me! It should work… I think.” Morgana pleads, his previous calmness deteriorating
rapidly. Sakamoto and Takamaki share a look, then they both glance down at him. His gaze shifts to the floor, to the tiles just beyond where Morgana’s tail is puffing into a mess of bristles.

Sakamoto sighs, “Mementos, then?” He asks, though he gets the feeling the question is one that isn’t meant to be answered.

“Candidate found.” Sakamoto’s phone cries out noisily. He jumps, surprised, though he knows he shouldn’t be.

“We got a hit?” Sakamoto questions tightly. His eyes are glued to the screen held between his fingers.

“Just as I thought!” Morgana retorts smugly, stepping over his leg to get closer to Sakamoto and Takamaki.

“You guys ready for this?” The blond questions.

“Mhm!” Takamaki consents, though her voice seems shaky.

He wonders if the same fear is gripping her, Sakamoto as well, that’s currently expanding in his stomach, if their throats feel as tight as his does right now. Ignoring the shaking that’s pulsing in his chest and spreading into his legs, Akira finds himself standing, and glancing long enough at Sakamoto to nod firmly before he finds his head reeling with similar, uncomfortable sensations.

It’s quiet… The silence is the first thing that he notices. The way his ears try to latch onto any sound is almost deafening, but he can’t find out why. Everything around them appears the same as it was before Sakamoto activated the Meta-Nav.

“Everyone’s disappeared!” Takamaki gasps out. Leaning forward, he glances towards the left, where he finds her statement to be correct. Where hundreds of feet were threatening to stampede the four of them, there was now nothing but empty space.

“This feeling, too,” She continues, stretching one hand out, then the other, “It feels like I’m… walking on air.” Shudders wrack through her fingers.

“This is Mementos?” Sakamoto asks, his voice and presence feel amplified now, strings of syllables echo off of the empty floors in a crude echo of his voice.

Creepy… He thinks, a shudder of his own spilling down his shoulders.

“That’s right.” Morgana confirms quietly, stepping forward towards the corner they’d turned in the real world, “Come on, let’s head down. The shadows here lurk underground.”

Morgana doesn’t wait for them to catch up, as he navigates towards the stairs leading to the actual stations.

“Wait up!” Sakamoto commands to no avail. The blond scoffs, but runs out of the secluded corridor and towards where Morgana had ran off to. With their height advantage over him though, the three of them easily catch up to him before he disappears fully.

“W-why do they stay underground?” Takamaki questions, taking hold of the guardrail that leads them lower into Mementos.

Morgana pauses halfway in his descent, stopping on a long stretch of stairway to turn back to Takamaki. “I’m not sure, it may because they’re drawn to something.” He answers honestly; or at
least he assumes that Morgana is being honest.

The air gets noticeably colder as they descend, darker as well, as if they were starting to sink into the ocean instead of the cognitive world. As they approach the bottom of the steps, Takamaki and Sakamoto are enveloped in sapphire flames; he watches, transfixed, as it stretches across their skin, leaving behind red and black leather, respectively, and reaches into their hair without them noticing.

When he passes down the same section of stairs, the similar sensation floods him with an audible woosh, as the cotton of his t-shirt and pants are replaced with exaggerated shadows within moments. The weight of the mask comes without notice until he lifts his fingers to drag along its edge.

Morgana awaits them at the bottom of the steps, nearly blanketed in the darkness of Mementos, save for the florescent sheen in his eyes, revealing one part of him, then the rest as his own eyes begin to adjust to the darkness.

Sakamoto turns his head over one shoulder, “Akira—Woah!” He looks down at his own hands, coated in bright, yellow material, “Our clothes changed!”

Takamaki gasps softly, but it echoes into the void they just walked down from, as well as the one that lingers below, “These clothes again…” Her fingers clench, the pink leather coating her fingers squeaks noisily.

“This means that the shadows know we’re here, doesn’t it?” Skull questions, glancing down at Morgana.

Morgana shrugs his now visible shoulders, “Since we came in, but we’ll be safe here, the shadows never come up to this level.”

“Still, you should have told us!” Skull complains, glancing around to confirm Morgana’s truth.

“It feels different than Kamoshida’s palace…” Takamaki states, glancing around as well, though nothing seems to draw her attention.

“There is something quite different about this place, isn’t there?” Morgana counters, leaping onto the guardrail of the next set of steps. “Still, I doubt you’ll be experiencing something quite as distorted as what you stumbled into with Kamoshida’s castle, anyway.”

Takamaki turns towards him, “Why’s that?”

“It takes an extreme amount of distorted desires to form an entire palace, this place, while bigger than Kamoshida’s, holds a much larger number of shadows, all of them harboring lesser distortions than you witnessed with him.” Morgana explains quietly.

_The palace of the world..._ He ponders, wondering if bigger was just putting it lightly; Mementos could go on forever. And according to Morgana, the secret to getting his body and memory back was somewhere in the depths of this place.

“This deal you struck seems to have been written sourly.” Arsene comments darkly, a rapturous cackle accompanying his words. He’s inclined to agree, even with the difficulties that Morgana had helped them through with Kamoshida’s palace, their end of the deal could take years to complete.

“So using this place, we’ll be able to change the hearts of people that don’t have a palace?” Takamaki asks.
Morgana grins, baring his altered, sharper teeth to them, “That’s correct, Lady Ann. Oh!” He suddenly gasps, “We still haven’t given you a codename!”

Takamaki winces, “C-codename?”

Sakamoto nods, though her attention isn’t on him, “Yup, all of us have ‘em. I’m Skull, Morgana is Mona, and he’s Joker.” He explains, pointing to each of them, “Mona said it would prevent any unconscious ideas about our identities from getting into the real world.”

“Skull.” Takamaki snorts, turning towards the blond, “Very you, Sakamoto.”

He rolls his eyes, “Skull.” He corrects, pointing towards his mask.

“Mona.” She announces next, nodding towards their feline teammate. Again, Mona smiles up at her.

“And Joker?” She says last, with a different tone, finally turning towards him. “I don’t get it.” She comments honestly, tilting her head a little to the side.

Morgana laughs triumphantly, “Joker is able to wield multiple personas, Lady Ann, therefore he’s the wildcard of our team!”

“Hmm.” Takamaki responds, “I think I get it, so what should mine be?”

Morgana, for once, has little to say. Akira turns towards Sakamoto, who he finds scratching his chin, looking rather caught up in thought.

She has a cat mask… and controls fire… He didn’t have any ideas, and it’s not like he’d be saying her codename, or her actual name for that matter, out loud anyway.

“Hm…” Morgana and Sakamoto hum in unison, he glances between them, watching as they both consider the girl standing in front of them.

Creepy…

“What about Catgirl?” Sakamoto shoots out first.

Morgana growls loudly, the reverberations straining into his voice as he speaks, “That’s stupid, Ryuji! How about Catwoman?”

Takamaki turns towards Sakamoto, raising a stiff, pink finger towards him, “No! I don’t want to be cat-anything!” She insists, there’s a cumbersome fierceness in her voice that he hasn’t encountered before, somewhere between when she’d confronted him about Shizui and when she’d been considering taking Kamoshida’s life.

He swallows, apprehensive, though he knew it was stupid; they were on the same team now.

“You got any ideas?” Skull’s voice is too sudden, and too loud, striking nerves like he’d been shocked. He jumps, and turns to his left; Sakamoto is standing in his immediate vicinity, close enough that he can hear the shifting of the metal plates that line his spine as he breathes.

Akira takes a step back, almost stumbling when the edge of his heeled shoe is caught on the solidness of the step. Lifting his foot higher, he slides onto the gritty surface of the next stair up, creating distance against the sudden proximity.

In the holes where Sakamoto’s mask allows him to see, the skin around his eyes stretches outwards
and he can tell that his teammate is raising his eyebrows at him.

He swallows again, nervous, and clutching his clammy fingers closer to his palms, unsure, but not uncaring, if the leather will dye his hands red.

_Not cat... Not cat... Not cat..._ He repeats, frantic, but unable to draw conclusions. _Lion... Lioness... Leopard... Leopardess... Panther..._ Shaking, he pushes his hands into the endless, shadowy folds of his outfit and pulls out his phone.

It brightens to life in his palm when he unlocks it, and opens his most frequented application.

_“Panther?”_ He fumbles with the weight of his phone, despite how familiar the weight is in his hand, how complete he feels with its heat, as he twists it around, facing it towards Skull.

_Stupid..._ He criticizes, suddenly frightened of their criticism, but unwilling to look at the half-expression etched into Sakamoto’s features as he stares at the phone screen. He swallows, again, wishing he’d brought his own water to cool the taut tension his throat was enduring.

_“Panther...”_ Sakamoto reads out loud, a moment later, slow enough that it sounds like two words instead of one.

He shouldn’t have suggested anything.

_“Panther?”_ Morgana echoes, loud, announcing it for the subway, the unconscious, to hear. He taps a paw at his rounded chin.

_“I like it.”_ Takamaki obliges, much to his surprise, and slight mortification, _“Much more elegant than catgirl... or woman...”_ Shudders stumble through the ember-colored contours of her shoulders, causing both her pigtails and tail to shake violently.

_“Panther it is then!”_ Morgana announces happily.

Akira sighs, relieved, yet apprehensive in a different way, something he can’t name yet.

_“Now that that’s out of the way, I can finish saying what I was talking about earlier!”_ Morgana continues, _“While exploring Mementos, we’ll be able to change the hearts of anyone in the world, provided that they don’t already have a palace. From my experience, the more distorted someone becomes, the more room they take up inside the floors below. It’s the beginning signs of extremely distorted desires.”_

_“So like... a mini-palace inside of a really big palace?”_ Skull questions, crossing his arms over his chest.

_“Something like that.”_ Morgana acknowledges, rather flatly.

_“So you said that this place holds everyone’s heart, right?”_ Takamaki—_Panther_ imposes. She waits for Morgana to acknowledge her, and he does so with a nod, _“Does that mean our hearts are in here somewhere?”_

Akira blinks, but leans in closer, curious.

_“Right now, the fact that we are inside of Mementos is the palace’s way of recognizing all of your hearts. Once a persona-user leaves Mementos, so does their heart. You aren’t... chained to the unconscious like the others are.”_ Morgana replies, looking almost uncomfortable, though his eyes are gleaming wickedly, as if he were happy at the same time. _“You’ll usually be able to tell when_
you’ve encountered another persona-user when you think about it like that.” He titters loudly.

Skull snorts, the sound amplified by the metal coning his nose. “You sayin’ we’re weird or something?”

Morgana, once more, taps his paw on his chin, as if carefully considering his reply, “Quite.” He admits, another, louder, laugh emerging from him. Skull laughs as well, though it is much quieter and much more abrupt than he’d assumed the other boy would.

“What about your heart, though, Mona?” Takamaki questions, shattering the moment.

Morgana’s smile twisted rapidly until it fell into a flat line that betrayed little emotion, “What about it?” He questions neutrally.

“You said that we’d be able to find your true form inside of Mementos, right?” She probed, “How are we supposed to find that if we can’t find your heart in this place?”

Morgana’s grimace intensified, so much so that Skull was beginning to look distinctly uncomfortable. The tension in his own shoulders began to tighten again.

Silence shatters his eardrums for an eternity. “I don’t know.” He responds, eventually, despondently, and devoid of his usual slyness. “I can’t remember anything before I met those two, but I know that Mementos is holding a part of me!” His quietness escalates until he’s all but yelling into Takamaki’s face, his small form is heaving from the effort.

Takamaki—Panther is no better, her shoulders are shaking, vibrating in place as she stares at the ground.

He takes another step back, that much closer to running, and that much further away from how tense and uncomfortable he’s feeling, though he’s not shaking nearly as badly as either Takamaki or Morgana.

“Ann…” Sakamoto states, stepping down the stairs that Akira hadn’t noticed him climb until he is level with her. His form towers over hers as he pulls her into an embrace, the brightness of her hair stark against the blackness of Sakamoto’s outfit, giving it curves and contour.

Akira’s eyes widen without him noticing and he stares over their combined shoulders, towards Morgana. Takes in his folded back ears and that darkened folds of his face. He feels bad for Morgana, and for Takamaki, as well; even if he doesn’t quite understand why he started to yell loud enough for him to forget his own fear and worry about others. He doesn’t understand Takamaki either, though, why she’d pressed Morgana the way she did.

He doesn’t understand any of it, and he feels like an idiot, standing there, gazing into a scene he’s barely a part of. Undeniably foolish, he admits, to the point where his face is heating up despite his eyes starting to dampen beneath the folds of his mask. It was good for something, at least.

Takamaki bawled into Sakamoto’s shoulder for what seemed like hours, she mumbled into his clavicles about things Akira knew little about, they one name kept riding into his ears in waves that never ceased to make him nauseous.

Suzui… Takamaki had told them that her friend was alive, but had yet to awaken from her coma. He wondered if she had known about the pictures, about everything that Kamoshida had done and would have continued to do if they hadn’t stepped in. Had she shared Sakamoto’s fate, suffering from Kamoshida’s cruelty and unable to find justice?
She snorted loudly, mucus gurgled loudly from where her face was tucked into Skull’s uniform and he turned his attention back to them, watching as she pulled away and adjusted the ferocious mask that represented her rebellion.

“Sorry about that.” She whispers, it echoes through each of them, “It’s just… hard to process all of this.” She pulls off the mask she had just adjusted and wipes at her eyes with her forearm.

“Ann…” Sakamoto says gently, standing taller than Akira had ever seen him. “We—“

“Panther.” She interrupts.

“Huh?” Sakamoto responds, wiping a shiny trail from his chest and onto his thigh.

“It’s Panther, in this place, anyways.” She explains, pulling her shoulders back and placing her mask back over her face. “Feeling sorry for myself and crying won’t fix what happened to Shiho, or to you… or to him or me, or anybody. We can do something now though...” She trails off, a smile warping the dimensions of her mask

“We get it, Panther.” Sakamoto finally finishes, managing a smile as well.

He doesn’t get it, not as much as Sakamoto or Morgana seem to, but finds himself nodding anyways when her gaze locks onto him.

“God,” She whines moments later, taking her face into her hands, “I must sound so cheesy.”

Sakamoto laughs again.

“Anyways, let’s go change some hearts!” She cheers, taking another drastic change in tone that it leaves him feeling a little behind.

Over Sakamoto’s shoulder, Morgana looks apprehensive, but waves a paw towards them, “Let’s get going then!” He orders, though there is no command behind his voice.

Mementos only gets colder and darker as the descend, the light of the sun had faded once they reached the turning point, leaving only the lights inside to guide them, though those too seemed to dim once they reached the following floor, leaving ember hues across the walls and floor. Everything he could see was shaded in an unnatural fog of red, even the shadows, stretching long and thin from the few fixtures inside of the subway, had a disturbing glow to them.

They reached the platform, perfectly mimicking the station he’d used to get here, except there was no stampedes and no hissing of the trains. Even when he held his breath, trying to extend his hearing, he heard nothing but the scuffling of their own feet and the shuddering sighs that lingered on his teammates’ lips. The contrast was the most disturbing part, he thought, how empty a packed area should be.

Morgana approaches the lip of the station, peering over the edge and then glancing both ways. Suddenly, he turns away from the empty train tracks and turns back towards them, half of his mouth twists into a smirk.

“Transform!” He shouts suddenly, his high-pitched voice echoing off of the stations walls, deep down into the darkened tunnels as he leaps off of the edge of the platform. It was a small drop, yet he couldn’t help the spike of adrenaline and concern that caused him to dash forward, intent on catching his teammate before he injured himself. Something groans in return, sending baritone vibrations back towards them, though he can’t make out any words from the noise.

Akira shudders, fazed, for the first time really, by how truly creepy this place was. He continues
towards the edge of the platform, and briefly spots Morgana’s huddled form before he’s enveloped in smoke that clears in the time it takes him to breathe in an unsettled gasp.

Morgana’s cat-like features disappear into the shadows of mementos, replaced with large, smooth lines, a rectangle with wheels.

A car... He ponders, concerned yet, somehow unsurprised.

"Joker? Guys?" The shape questions, the tires hopping up and down until a windshield is pointed towards them, along with oddly eye-like headlights. He finds himself avoiding their gaze, the unsettling sensation beginning to set in.

“You’re a car?” Skull belts out, suddenly beside him. He jumps, nearly losing his footing but catches himself from tipping over the edge and onto the train tracks. “What the hell?” The blond whispers, though it echoes enough that he may as well have yelled it.

“... A car?” Takamaki questions, stepping to the other side of Sakamoto. The headlights of the vehicle slide towards the sound of her voice, gleaming a deep blue over Panther.

Morgana’s voice erupts out of the car again, prefaced with an amused snicker, “This comes from the way cognition materializes in the Metaverse.” The car explains, “Along with a little extra training.” One of the headlights winks shut, then opens just as quickly, “It’s not dissimilar to how you guys transform.”

That... makes sense. He supposes it wasn’t the weirdest thing he’d seen in the past week.

A gust rushes past him with a flash of yellow, the air crackles a bit and he steps backwards, confused, and watches as the black of Sakamoto’s arm is soon covered in sparks that lead and end into the blinding coating on his clenched fist.

The air around them crackles as well, Panther’s and Skull’s hair rise against the forces of gravity, and he’s sure that is own is following as well.

“You turnin’ into a car is was different than our clothes changin’!” Skull spits out.

Morgana doesn’t seem to notice the shifting in the air, most likely due to his body being composed of metal; expanding, breathing metal. “For some reason, ‘cats changing into busses’ is an extremely widespread cognition among the general public.” Morgana reports, the front end of his new form dipping forward as if shrugging shoulders that weren’t there.

Panther attempts to smooth down her suddenly unruly hair, “Why a bus though?”

The shape dips forward again, “No idea.”

Skull stomps his foot, causing the air to crackle like static once again, drawing their attention, “Why didn’t you do this at the castle, then? We almost got crushed!”

The grill of Morgana’s car curves downwards, resembling a frown, “I would have if I could!” His voice shouts, echoing into the tunnels beyond them, “But that castle was cramped, there was no way I’d be able to get all of you out before the place came toppling down on us!”

The crackling fades until his ears are ringing, searching for sound that isn’t there.

Skull slides over the lip of the platform first and Akira watches, curious, as the blond hooks his fingers into one of Morgana’s handles and tugs. The door sweeps open, blocking his view of
Morgana’s inside as well as his teammates as Panther pushes Skull to the side and jumps into the backseat.

“What the hell!” The blond shouts over a fit of high pitched giggles, “That’s dangerous!” He warns; the door slams shut, muting Panther’s laugh.

Skull is suddenly in his view again, and Akira slips over the edge of the platform and offering a hand before the blond has his feet under him. Despite his yelling, and subsequent grumbling where Takamaki couldn’t hear, there’s a smile ripping Sakamoto’s face open.

The blond takes his hand, and an overwhelming pressure grabs pulls down on his wrist through his glove to the point where he digs both heels into the ground to avoid falling onto the tracks around them.

*He’s heavier than he looks...* He thinks, not quite sure why he’s surprised. The blond claps him on the shoulder, hard enough that it kind of hurts.

“Thanks, dude.” The door Panther had just slammed shut is pulled open with yellow-coated fingers and Sakamoto climbs in, leaving the door open.

Akira steadies himself, rolling his shoulder until the soreness fades, before turning on his heel and climbing into Morgana as well.

The insides are unusually red, deeper than his gloves when he compares them, pressing his palm against the seat in front of him.

…*Gross.* He tries not to ponder it for too long, though he doesn’t have to ask to know that he’s currently sitting on Morgana’s *insides.* He squirms.

“All aboard!” Skull announces, dragging the phrase out, “Let’s go!”

Morgana’s voice enters the car as if he were sitting right in front of them, “Why are you all just sitting back there? I’m a car, remember? I’m not going anywhere unless someone *drives me*...”

He glances across the seat, first as Skull, who’s closer, than at Panther, hoping that one of them has their license.

“You can’t drive yourself?” Skull barks back, glancing around the interior of the car like he was looking at Morgana’s face.

Takamaki glances towards him, then stares at him from behind the crimson of her mask, “Do… you know how to drive?” She questions.

He shakes his head, he hadn’t been around cars at all, now that he thought about it, except for when he was being arrested and when Sakura-san had driven him to Shujin.

Her gaze shifts to Skull, “Ryu—Skull?” She asks next. He shakes his head too, and Takamaki sighs loudly.

“You wanna rock-paper-scissors for it or…?” Skull speaks up, lifting his fist into the air between them.

“I—I don’t want to drive!” Panther asserts, shaking her hands wildly in return.

Skull shifts in the seat, turning towards him, “What about you, leader?”
“Leader!?" Panther shouts from the other side of the seat, making him flinch. The girls leans forward and stares at him again, “Then he should be the one driving!” She announces, looking panicked.

Sakamoto’s chin wrinkles into a frown, “Yeah, I guess so.” The plates on his back shift together noisily as the blond shrugs, “Just don’t crash us into a wall, Akira!”

Face heating up, he steps out of Morgana, and stares into one end of the tunnel that’s surrounding them, grateful for the cold air that Mementos provides. Within him, Arsene chuckles, the noise is devoid of the unusual presence that the persona usually brings.

*Do you know how to drive a car?* He thinks loudly, enough to pierce the veil that separates him from the numerous presences residing within him.

Arsene snorts again, surprisingly inelegant.

He climbs into the driver’s seat and rests his hands on the foreign sturdiness of the driving wheel. Fingers twitching nervously, he grips the wheel, sighing quietly as the leather coating his palms squeaks noisily against Morgana’s wheel.

Akira stares at the dashboard; complexed and sweating.

“Start the engine; you can’t drive me if the engine isn’t running!” Morgana guides, voice somehow reaching him through the pounding in his ears.

The interior right over his shoulder squeaks noisily, and he looks over just in time to see Skull’s form falling into the seat beside him. The blond leans closer, peering around from under the sheen of his mask before opening his mouth, “Where’s the key to this thing?” He barks towards the windshield.

The car’s equilibrium shifts uncomfortably, making his stomach shudder in ways that it shouldn’t, “Why would there be a key?” Morgana’s voice calls out, “There’s a button under the steering wheel!”

Akira leans down and, to Morgana’s word, under the steering wheel, a small black peered out against the red of Morgana’s interior. Hesitantly, he pressed his finger into it and instantly the car around them sprang to life, vibrating the car’s walls, as well as the seat beneath them.

The window beside him lowered on its own accord, he turned to face the absent barrier, staring into the abyss of tunnels as Morgana’s voice called out to him, louder now, through the gap.

“That feels so good.” His teammate purred over the sound of the engine.

“Is the car… purring?” Panther questions, suddenly leaning over the seat, her mask peeking into his view along with her bright hair.

Skull sighs, “What a creepy ass car.”

He’s inclined to agree.

“Let’s go!” Morgana instructs, the car tilting forward as if it were a cat, leaning forward to pounce.

Akira resettles his grip upon the steering wheel and moves his boot around until he finds one of the pedals. He pushes it and the car leaps forward about a foot and he immediately lets go, feeling panicked.
Letting out a deep breath, he pushes the pedal again, slower and lighter than before, and the outside around them starts to roll past them slowly.

“Through there.” Morgana instructs, the van tilting forward, drawing his attention to a large metal gate, bathed in dim, rusty light.

The metal breeches open when he drives in front of it, screeching loudly as the two panels separate from one another, dragging its chains and spitting up dust as if it hadn’t been moved since it had been created. The two doors went on forever, the distinction between the two lost in the darkness that lie above them.

A deep sniff of air trilled from within, as if Arsene were taking in a long-awaited breath, then went quiet.

Akira swallowed, then pushed on the pedal once more, pushing the van into the purple-hued darkness that lie beyond the gate. Driving over the threshold left him feeling no worse, but no better, than it had felt on the other side, and looking out of the windshield left him feeling no more at peace with Mementos than when they had arrived.

The tunnel’s floor held two sets of tracks, one going one way, and the latter going the other, though he had no way to give distinctions between the two, the walls were lined with posters and advertisements that he recognized from the real world, yet were defaced with age and dust, illuminated under dark, ominous hues. The wind howled at them as he continued driving, sounding like voices, but he wasn’t able to recognize any of the words.

He pressed a little harder on the pedal, hoping the excess wind would drown out the sounds. Fortunately, it worked; though now he was barreling into the darkness of the tunnels, winding past turns but unable to recall if he’d taken a right or left. His hands were moving of their own accord, guiding him while his brain continued to try and make sense of these new sensations.

The van went very still far too quickly, and, thinking about it, realized that he hadn’t been searching for the shadows that Morgana warned them about. Around them, the van began to dematerialize, shrinking and twisted into shape while they slowly fell to the ground.

In front of them, a lump of limbs, composed of pure blackness screeched as it was hit with the now non-existent van.

Akira landed on his feet, sending small, rattling shocks through his knees and into his spine, though his attention lie on the crude shape before them.

The gleaming shape exploded, sending small piles of tar splattering in a ring around it before three shapes emerged from it, resembling one of the persona that was currently within him.

“You!” They shouted, their shrill voices out of sync.

Morgana appeared beside him, his paws wrapped around the handle of his oversized blade.

The shadows advanced upon them, threatening them as magic began to spark out around them.

“Zorro!” Gusts of began visibly lashing out, shattering whatever weight that had been attempting to restrain him.

Arsene’s wings sent larger, more potent drafts through the tunnels, pushing the shadows back until there was a sizable distance between them.
Blinding, splintering light scattered across the darkened ceiling above them before forks of lighting imbedded into the enemies across from them.

They moaned weakly, sparks shooting off of them as they fell to the floor, their wings twitching, but otherwise unmoving.

“Panther!” Skull shouted from beside him.

Akira glanced over at the girl, who remained, like the shadows, motionless.

“Takamaki!” He tried again, drawing her out of her daze.

The blond jumped in place, and threw forth the whip in her hand. It cracked like thunder against the prone form of one of the shadows, disintegrating it, then fell limply against the ground.

She gasped loudly, but remained still.

“Stop!” The remaining two cried, “Stop!”

His shoulders tensed at the sound, but he approached them.

“I won’t do it again!” One sobbed.

“Never again!” The other added one.

Akira swallowed down his curiosity, then waved them off, healing them enough for them to escape into the dark tunnels.

He glanced down at the ground, where the third shadow had been.

Coins lie in its place, along with a bird’s feather.

He pocketed the money, and after a moment of deliberation, the feather as well.

“That was…” Panther began, stepping up to him, and crossing her arms.

“Weird?” Skull finished, frowning.

“Nothing like Kamoshida.” She said instead.

Skull nodded, but said nothing.

“Not all of humanity are like Kamoshida.” Morgana supplied.

“I guess that’s a good thing,” Panther amended, “But I wish it didn’t make me feel guilty for beating them up.”

The plates on Skull’s spine ground against each other, “Y-yeah… I wonder what they were doin’ anyway.”

Morgana stepped back, shifting back into the van soundlessly.

They piled in, and Akira couldn’t help but feel that things felt worse now than they had before.
Sorry for not updating for a while.
Been busy with school.
Also like, every week I don't update I keep thinking, "Well, now I need more content to share!" So I sit down and write, but don't update because I don't want a short chapter for how long I've been gone.

Anyway, let me know what you guys think about this chapter or the story in general.
Mementos grows colder as they descend, growing not only larger, but darker as well as they fight through shadows. Each sobbing cry is tacked into his memory and he feels intrusive and alien as he explores the worst part of stranger’s hearts; he doesn’t know their names, only their sins, a complete contrast to Kamoshida, who he knows better than any of his teammates.

The wind screams, too, like the shadows they fight, only endlessly distant. Awful tragedies that he feels but cannot understand, leaving him thoroughly shaken, though he seems to be the only one affected by their voices. If they even are voices.

Akira blinks, again. His vision having long since blurred into a mix of red and black. He’s not sure if Mementos is causing it, or the lack of light, or the lethargy that seems to begin strangling him tighter as Morgana ushers them into the van after each fight.

They turn a corner, as normal as every other within the endless subway, and he shoves his foot on the brake as quickly as he can before Morgana’s transformed face is thrusted into an endless sheet of swirling blood and blackness.

He leans forward, resisting the urge to rest his chin on the steering wheel and gazes into the unknown; he doesn’t know if it gazes back, and is certain he’d rather not find out.

The purr of Morgana’s engine silences on its own accord.

“What is it, Morgana?” Panther asks, leaning over the seat to stare at it as well.

Beside him, Skull remains quiet, his mask reflecting the pattern before them eerily.

“This must be an area of heavy distortion.” The voice around them says, “It’s the beginning formations of a palace.”

Akira swallows, attempting to soothe his drying throat to no avail.

“How do we… fix it?” Skull eventually asks, when the wind died down.

“There’s a shadow in there; only one, but it must be stronger than the rest if it’s forming these distortions.” Morgana says instead, “If we drive into it and defeat the shadow, this area should return to normal.”

He turns to the other two, gaging their responses, though he finds himself staring into the blankness of their masks more than anything.

Panther clears her throat, drawing Skull’s attention, then his own, “Shouldn’t we take a rest or something?”

The engine roars to life, Morgana shouting something that he can’t decipher before they’re thrust into the swirling veil.

His foot was still on the brakes.

Driving into the budding palace sent shivers down his body, replicating the sensation of first
entering Kamoshida’s palace and Mementos.

At the same time, the shield around them shifted away from them as Morgana reverted back into his original form, his sword drawn and gripped firmly between two paws before Akira could find the balance to stand up fully.

Pulling himself up, he looked past Morgana, into the distorted section of Mementos, though it looked no different than the other tunnels they had driven past. In the center of the small area, however, stood a human figure, a female, tall with dark hair and bangs resting atop glasses not dissimilar to Akira’s own. Under them, smoldering yellow pupils glared towards them. She wore a school uniform, but he didn’t recognize what school it might be from.

The woman—the girl laughed wickedly, vibrating the air around them supernaturally.

He covered his ears with his palms, though that only seemed to make the noise louder. Shrill, harping shrieks that bounced around in his ears until finally, it stopped.

Peering through his mask, Akira caught sight of the girl once more, looking more disheveled than she had moments ago. Gusts of wind rippled past around her.

“They don’t understand!” The girl says, her fingers speaking for her, waving like twin swords. It took him far longer than he’d like to admit that the girl in front of them was using sign language. “Nobody understands!”

“Uh—” Skull started, only for the screams to start over, drowning out any reply the blond might have had.

Morgana stepped forward again, drowning out the sound with another whirlwind.

“All they do is bully me, that’s what you all are here for, isn’t it?” She accused, gesturing to them all with a sharp swipe of her arm.

Akira stepped forward until he was in front of their team, serving as a proxy between them. “No, we’re not here for that.” He replied, signing each word as his brain scrambled to grasp them. It felt like ages had passed since he’d actually held a conversation without a pen and paper.

The girl in front of him seemed to shrink down at his reply, her shoulders dropping as her head rolled forward, the manic yellow of her eyes concealed by a curtain of dark hair. She stepped forward.

“You’re lying!” The screams picked up again, this time, only amplified when Morgana attempted to silence her. “Lying! Lying!” Her hands echoed as legs began oozing into a puddle of black tar. Smoke began to rise out of her unnatural form as the girl’s body began to slowly melt into the blackness at her feet. Her hands, until they began to melt, only told him one thing. ‘Liar! Liar! Liar!’ Her eyes, the last portion of her that remained outside of the growing mass of blackness glared out and towards him; only at him.

The room went quiet, both the wind from Morgana’s persona and the screams from the girl had faded into nothing, leaving only the gurgling of the still growing mass in front of them.

It exploded with a splatter of flesh on concrete, a sound he was unable to describe but was unable to forget. The black ooze that had melted the girl curdled in thick chunks on the ground. In the center of the explosion, floating above the ground, a shadow emerged; a conglomerate of hundreds of stony arms that rested under a stony face, either side held a broad smile while the center oozed out a blackened figure, like a creature attempting to break free of its shell but failing in the process.
The mass between the two portions shifted, pushing the clay aside and birthing out a hole, revealing lines of jagged teeth. The rows spread apart, exposing its insides just before releasing another screech, one that, without doubt, echoed through the empty tunnels of Mementos behind them.

The shadow’s hands shifted then, creating words that only Akira would know, yet couldn’t find meaning behind. Hundreds of phrases and conversations played out before him and he sighed out, wishing there was something else that he could do to help before accessing the power deep within him.

One of his personas beckoned to his call, though he wasn’t sure which one before he sent blasts of magic towards the girl—the shadow.

His teammates followed his action, stepping forward and summoning their strength as the girl continued to scream, only interrupting by the sound of gurgling and mumbling Japanese each time they managed to strike her.

“Enough already!” Sakamoto cried out, the lines of his face unobscured by his mask were tensed up considerably, twin lines of blood filtered down either side of his face, stemming from his ears and disappearing into the high collar of his outfit.

The screaming stopped again, and the shape behind the mask receded backwards, sinking back into itself until the two halves formed a whole face. It gleamed back at them, illuminated by the flames that covered the room from Panther’s failed attacks.

Skull faltered, “D-did that work?” He questions, before his body goes still, his spine straightening almost unnaturally as a wave of pink mist flows into his mouth. “What the hell…” He mutters, turning his gaze towards the girl, then back at them.

The screaming continues, and Akira turns his attention back to the reemerging figure that lies inside of the mask before sending a lance of ice towards it. It shatters upon impact, leaving crystals on the floor, but otherwise seeming to have no effect.

He’s just about to make another attempt when something gleams in his peripheral, and he has just enough time to raise his arm in reflex before a familiar metal pipe descends downwards.

Akira doesn’t scream, but his mouth opens, and the muscles in his throat tighten until it feels like they might snap, and it might as well be the same thing.

The pipe descends again, sending him to the floor, though he wisely keeps his arm up as he’s falling, just as the weapon crashes into him again, sending vibrations through the arm. Like glass to a powerful voice, he can feel the bone in his arm eventually shatter as another strike comes in.

He manages to look up, past his now broken arm, past the pipe that he can’t move away from, and into the face of a new enemy; Skull’s eyes are glowing brightly pink, the exposed mouth below his mask is moving quickly, as if forming words but isn’t saying them out loud.

“Ryuji!” Two voices scream, the rush of wind and roar of flame both dying out, letting him know that his hearing isn’t gone.

Pink gloves, not dissimilar to Skull’s eyes currently, scoop under the flexing darkness of Skull’s uniform, holding both of his arms back while Morgana calls forth Zorro.

Panther’s hold doesn’t last when Skull seems to notice this arm is no longer working. The blond stretches out on either side, breaking her grasp until he latches onto her, grabbing her by the wrist,
and flinging her to the side.

The pipe returns to the sparking yellow that glows in his hand and Skull finally approaches Morgana. The cat seems infinitesimally small compared to Skull’s straightened physique.

“Zorro!” He screams, just as Panther shouts, “Carmen!”

From either side, Skull is blasted with clouds of green smoke, they come together, surrounding the blond until he falls to his knees, the plate on his leg shooting sparks into the air upon impact. The pipe clatters to the ground as well.

The mask on the shadow comes together once again, and Akira focuses, pushes the pain aside, to send something barreling towards her.

The hands explode, sending bits of stone in every direction and extinguishing the flames that had managed to surround them.

The girl emerges from the shape, though he isn’t sure how. She adjusts the pleat on her skirt, and glances up at him from behind her glasses. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She signs, saying the words out loud in thick, almost unrecognizable Japanese.

“Thank you.” Is a sign he instantly recognizes before her form shifts from opaque to transparent into nothing. Something clatters to the ground where she had been standing, but one of his eyes won’t open and the other has dust in it. He rubs at the latter with his working hand; attempts to ignore the all-consuming pain that spirals up the other.

Dust and ash make his tongue gritty and he can’t resist spitting onto the ground next to him, not really in the mindset to be polite.

“Joker!” Morgana calls, looking distressed when the cat finally blooms into his field of vision. Zorro ruminates behind him, appearing in a flicker of velvet blaze before, as one, their arms extend outwards, Morgana merely raising his paw while his person raises an enormous blade until the rounded end is pointed towards him.

The same blinding green light emits from the end of the blade, and envelops him. The air around him cools quickly, despite the still dying flames lingering all around; the chill seeps into his lungs when he inhales, biting down his esophagus like a winter wind. It goes further than that, though, it sinks into the layers coating his body until he shivers, the burning numbness that had strangled his arm and face receded deeper within, away from the pervasive aura around him.

“Come on…” A voice called, Morgana’s, from outside of the bubble around him. Akira opened his eyes, unsure when they had slipped shut, and found that both of them were painlessly operational. The air around him chilled further, the green that spouted from Zorro’s sword grew more opaque until he could barely see past the fog being produced.

Minutes or seconds passed between each slow lift of his eyelids, the reflex forcing him awake to notice that the burn inside of him sizzled into nothing, leaving him numb; neither pained nor excited for the lack of.

The fog faded.

Akira lifted his arm, the same one that Skull had mutilated, but saw only the pristine blackness of his coat surrounding the limb. He formed a fist; experimenting with his shattered fingernails, only to find the sensation completely painless.
Standing, too, was painless, but certainly not effortless. His energy sapped from whatever it was that Morgana had done to him.

“Joker!” Morgana called out, no longer muffled and piercingly loud. “Are you okay?” The cat questioned at the same time that Panther piped in, stepping forward for the first time until she was standing right beside him, reaching for his seemingly uninjured arm.

Akira relented, letting her pull back the sleeve and exposing his skin to the briskness of Mementos’ atmosphere. It bared no evidence of having been so much as scratched, let alone bashed in with a metal pipe.

He pulled the sleeve down and Takamaki let go. Glancing around, he spotted the plating of Skull’s spine bent over the pile of stone the shadow had left behind.

Slowly, but steadily, he walked over to the other man. Unsure if this was wise, even if the blond seemed to be himself once more.

He peered over his teammate’s shoulder, towards the pile of stones. He was able to pick out ligaments from her crumbled form, fingers trapped in phrases that would never be complete.

Akira tapped on the boy’s shoulder, and the blond flinched, jerking his shoulders back in reflex before peering upwards at him. In a swift motion, Skull stood to his full height, towering over him by several inches before slouching down, creating a minimal distance between their eye level.

Skull avoided looking at him, staring instead at his feet. He kicked at an extended fist— you, turning into chunks that littered the floor elsewhere. Akira stared at his teammate, not into his eyes, but at the edge of his silver mask.

Pulling out his phone, Akira asked, “Are you okay?”

Skull glanced at him, his gaze sinking to the screen quickly. Yellow gloves extended forward, taking the phone into both of his hands, the pipe nowhere to be found.

With his phone shining onto his face, Akira was able to make out the details of his teammate’s face; the twitches in the mask, as if it were a second skin instead of a thick working of metal, the creases and folds that spoke of frustration.

He looked away, feeling guilty or shameful; he couldn’t figure out which.

Skull scoffs then, pushing the phone back at him, the glow pointed towards the floor, casting them both in shadow once again.

“Shouldn’t—Shouldn’t I be asking you that, d-dude?” Skull questions, lifting a hand. Akira catches the blur of the movement and watches as it pauses just shy of his mask. The blond sniffs loudly then continues, “I didn’t mean to… O-obviously… damnit.”

“I wasn’t in control, is what I mean.” He restarts, volume decreasing with each syllable until Skull’s admission turns into a harsh whispering that’s hissing into the empty space.

Skull looks at him, his mask gleaming even in the room’s darkness; Akira nods, unsure but sympathetic, and the blond lowers his head once more.

“She did somethin’ to me, ya know? When she did that thing with her face, I felt… weird, an’ I didn’t recognize you or Ann.” He pauses, then presses a finger to his head, bright yellow sticking out of much paler shades, “She was talking to me. In my head, I mean; that she was controlin’ me,
that I had to…”

“Ryuji…” Another voice speaks up, breaking the intense spell that Akira had found himself in listening to Skull’s story. Skull stops speaking, then stomps his foot onto another fragment of the girl’s fingers, crushing it into dust.

_Controlled… It explains that look then…_ Akira steps forward, towards the pile of stone that the girl had left behind and crouches beside it, fingering through the shards of stone until he finds something.

“It wasn’t your fault, Ryuji.” Morgana explains, stepping between the two of them. “Some shadows have abilities that—I should have warned you about it.” Morgana’s gulp fills the room, “I’m sorry.”

Akira doesn’t hear Skull respond, and with his back to them, he can’t see if the expression his teammate makes. Instead, he finds himself wiping dust off a hearing aid. One edge is coated in brown and won’t wipe off, despite his efforts, and he finds himself staring at it.

_Could I have been like her?_ He asks.

“Possibly.” Comes his response.

His fist closes around the device, then pockets it.

When he stands back up and turns around, he finds his teammates standing right behind him and he jumps a little.

Takamaki laughs, pushing her mask onto the top of her head. “Everything okay? I guess we should have asked earlier.” She laughs again, but it’s a far more awkward experience.

He nods, still reeling from the scare.

She nods back and opens her mouth, but no words are spoken.

They exit the area, Morgana silently shifting back into his bus form and carrying them out of the spiraling entrance; the purr of the engine was remarkably absent.

After the confrontation, shadows afterwards were easier to attack. They felt less human than the girl they’d changed the heart of, each of their consciousness screaming about the continuation of their ways or the lack of. He supposed he could have felt this way because she spoke like he did; their hands were their voices and hers were currently melting into dust while his…

He glanced down at his own hands, the crimson layer surrounding them, the steering wheel that was curling around his fingers instead of the other way around.

Akira slammed on the brakes again, but instead of a massive glowing entrance, there remained a stagnant, grey wall. It wasn’t dissimilar to the gate that they’d drove through to access Mementos, but wielded intricate designs that reflected light that didn’t exist.

Morgana shifted from around them, shrinking into his feline presence, and approached the door. Tentatively, he followed, brushing his fingers over the edge of a sanguine circle. It pulsed under his hand, but nothing else happened.

“What is this?” Panther questioned, stepping forward from where Morgana had left them with a click of her heel.
Morgana didn’t answer, occupied with slamming his balled up fists against the stone to no success. “Open. Open! Open!” He commanded, crescendoing until his voice was echoing off of the pillars surrounding them.

Nothing happened.

Morgana’s blade slid across the stone barrier, casting sparks onto the ground with thunderous skidding.

Nothing happened.

“Morgana.”

The blade slashed forward again, coming from the reverse direction. Sparks splattered onto his shoes and Akira took a step backwards.

Nothing happened.

The cat continued slashing, the door soaking in the imprints of the razor thin blade only to fill them instantly with the same glowing material the wall’s decorations were made of. In an instant, they faded back into the same bleak stone.

“Morgana!”

Morgana faltered, the sword clattering to the floor then dissipating; he fell to his knees, bowing before the massive wall. A loud, rhythmic panting flowed in and out of his curled up body.

Takamaki stepped forward again, the red of her presence coating Morgana’s entire frame. He’s not sure why she does it, or why Morgana’s form heaves harder as a result of it; but moments later, he’s baring witness to Morgana breaking down in front of him, together with Skull, they take spectator roles as Takamaki holds his shrinking form and shushes his screams.

Beyond that wall… He tears his eyes away from his teammates, to the emblazoned wall, sitting mute to both the scene and his discomfort.

Morgana’s true form is behind there. Akira supposes he’d also face some distress at being as close as they were to his goal. He looks away from the wall, then, towards his group, and steps forward, edging over Takamaki’s shoulder. His gloved hand falls down onto Morgana’s sunken head just as Takamaki retracts hers.

Morgana’s form freezes under the contact and he worries, for a moment, that he’d done something wrong before a small sigh comes from the shadowed lump.

The head under his hand squirms, and in the next moment, Morgana is staring at him between the gaps of his fingers. The darkness of Mementos does nothing to hide the glassiness of Morgana’s gaze, just as the cover of his hand does nothing to conceal the liquid sliding down into the corner of one of his giant eyes, only to sink into the fur right below it.

“Sorry, Joker…” Morgana croaks, wiping at his face with either of his paws. He sniffs loudly, the same sound that Skull had made earlier, then looks back at him, and finally collapses into a small pile upon himself. If he had been in the form he took on while in the real world, he would have looked resembled a dozing cat; instead, on Takamaki’s lap lie Morgana’s unnaturally large head with his appendages curled around it.

He retracts his hand, and stands up.
For the second time that day, Skull is standing over his shoulder when he turns around, causing him to jump once again.

Skull’s mouth opens when their gazes clash, but quickly closes, the edges of his face becoming as hard as his mask. “Did he… fall asleep?” He asks quite loudly.

Akira nods.

Skull sighs loudly, “I guess that means we’re walking out of here?”

Panther shushes him, the sharpness of the noise louder than Skull’s complaints. She takes to her feet, cradling Morgana’s weight carefully as she does so. “I mean, it’s only fair.” She whispers, curving her lips into a smirk.

“What is?” Skull eventually asks, falling into step beside Takamaki as she begins walking off, towards the stairs far behind them.

“I mean, he’s been carrying us all around this place, it’s only fair that we carry him now; irony, and all that, I guess.” Skull snorts.

“Uh… you comin’?” Skull calls out, standing at the edge of the stairs.

Akira blinks, then looks forwards, at his two teammates.

“Waiting for me?” He questions nobody in particular.

“Of course.” Arsene responds, cryptic as always.

He paces towards them, and they wait until he gets there before they all start ascending the steps. Despite this, he finds himself falling behind. The adrenaline keeping him on his feet was starting to fade, and fatigue was starting to sink in, weighing him down; first on his head, then slowly towards his feet as if he were filling with sand, only in reverse.

When he reaches the top of the first set of stairs, he finds Panther and Skull waiting for him once more, looking marginally more annoyed than before. All three of them are panting heavily, however, which makes him feel a little less isolated.

Skull rubs at one of his thighs, just above the metal plating coating his knee. Takamaki’s arms seem to be buckling under the weight of Morgana’s frame, and he gestures for her to hand him over.

Her face expresses something he can’t quite comprehend as her arms extend outwards and Akira finds himself saddled with Morgana’s hefty weight once more.

He’s heavier this way… He notices, tucking his arm to support Morgana’s rope thin neck.

Panther cuts across from him, ducking herself under Skull’s arm so she’s managing some of his weight. Skull says nothing in return, and together they ease their way through the howling subways.

The shadows take less notice of them outside of Morgana’s bus, something he’s immensely grateful for, yet the lack of barrier between them, even one as thin as Morgana’s windshield, makes sneaking past them much more intense.

The sun’s lingering light shines painfully into his eyes when they finally ascend to ground level. Its
warmth and intensity feel almost alien when he comes into contact with it, though he’s almost too exhausted to notice it; Morgana hadn’t woken up during their journey back to the surface.

They exit Mementos in a blur of his vision and the onset of a headache. At once, his stomach and bladder constrict painfully, causing him to lurch forward and over himself, Morgana’s form clenched painfully between his chin and rib cage.

“You okay, Akira-kun?” Takamaki questions, dropping Ryuji’s weight and stepping in front of him.

He sighs deeply into Morgana’s now cat-shaped body, then lifts back up until he’s standing normally; he nods.

“Just make sure you two—er… three get home safe, okay?” Again, he nods. Skull does the same when she turns back to him, just a few steps away from where she had left him.

“See you tomorrow!” She says, all too cheerful suddenly.

He waves when she does, and watches as she wanders into the heavy crowd of the train station.

Akira presses himself against the wall of the station, sinking lower on each tile until he’s seated, Morgana’s weight taking up the majority of his lap; still unconscious, despite their departure from the Metaverse.

Beside him, a blur of purple sinks down to the floor beside him. Sakamoto rubs at his knee, massaging the bone and muscle and hissing; the kind of pain that the Metaverse couldn’t fix.

“I uh, wanted to talk to ya, about before…” Skull starts, still rubbing at his painful leg.

Akira nods helplessly, even if he wanted to run off—something his brain urged him to do as he relived the shattering of his arm for a moment. He swallowed, uncomfortable with how dry his throat had become.

“I think I should say sorry, I mean I didn’t mean to—and I was out of control of what I was doing.” Sakamoto stops massaging his leg, the nimble fingers melting into clenched fists. “It reminded me of what Kamoshida did, how I was just a puppet, I guess. That make sense?”

Akira finds himself nodding, though it doesn’t seem right, to him. He understands that feeling in a way more than a shake of his head can convey.

Skull nods as well, a huff of air escaping his nose. “I get it if you don’t wanna be around me, anymore; I break everything I touch anyway.” The admission is tense, and equally as unexpected, “And I can’t control any of it.”

“That’s not true.” He’s not sure why he feels the need point it out; the truth, that is. Sakamoto had been kind to him, even if it was only for their similarities. All of this was his own volition.

Sakamoto stares at his screen, and Akira feels almost uncomfortable with how much of the blond’s face he can see outside of the Metaverse.

“Ya don’t gotta lie to me.” Sakamoto’s rebuttal is short said, the words like chipping ice.

“You’re nice to me, and Takamaki, and Morgana… sometimes.” Sakamoto scoffs at his message, but his lips quirk upwards even as he rolls his eyes.
“Whatever, man.” He takes to his feet, both of his legs seeming stable underneath him now, “Gotta get dinner before my ma gets off work. See ya tomorrow?”

Akira nods, waving Sakamoto off as he, too, disappears into the swarm of travelers around them.

He sinks back into the tiles, panting openly now, and remains there until the sky shifts into orange and pink, then finally into a deep, dark purple.

Chapter End Notes

uwu sorry for the late updates, the Pegoryu server been distracting me for too long.
Please leave a review. :)
Akira doesn’t move when Sakamoto fades into the crowd, nor does he move when the moon rises fully in the spring sky, not that he can see it through the glowing obstacles of Tokyo’s skyscrapers. His body stills, turning sediment against the station’s wall, and refuses to move the several times he considers going back to Yongen-Jaya. He doesn’t think about much, either. His body focuses on manufacturing energy that he’s been deprived of; his mind, though, refuses to entertain him while he waits. It creates a numbness—an emptiness, that he hasn’t felt since before his move, since before his trail. It is blissfully idyllic, but painfully sentimental. Of course, he finds himself lingering in it when his body finds itself strengthened enough for the walk home, pretending that the rough stone against his back is as pliable as tree bark. That the clamor of the city is crows and owls singing to each other. One thing doesn’t change, though. He is alone.

Morgana doesn’t react when Akira climbs to his feet, the cat remains as pliant as he had hours ago. He’s still breathing, of course, slowly and subtly. His heart beats rhythmically, pulsing against his fingers as he maneuvers his roommate into his schoolbag as carefully as he can. Though it doesn’t seem to matter, Morgana sleeps as peacefully inside the bag as he does occupying Akira’s lap.

He doesn’t descend into the station immediately, though he does consider the lowering entrance for a moment before he wanders away from it, his chest clenching with ancient memories. Knowing what he does now, he doubts that just by walking down those steps he would find himself surrounded by shadows or locked in a cell with a throbbing head, yet the thought of the Metaverse has his heart hammering against his chest until he passes around a corner, the tension behind his skull doesn’t fade until the corner after that.

He’s not sure where he’s going, but he knows what he’s looking for.

Leaning his head back, he reads store signs through the neon glare they trace over his glasses. Hundreds of signs and several streets pass before he finds himself both at his destination as well as incredibly lost.

Stepping into the brightly lit store, Akira found himself strolling through each aisle as quickly as possible, the encumbering tilt of Morgana’s weight against his side quickly taking its toll on his legs. Finally, though, he found the area he had been searching for.

Bracing himself, he removed his hands from supporting Morgana’s weight and reached outwards, lifting a litter box made of dark plastic. It was the cheapest on the shelf, and its quality showed sitting side by side with more expensive models. Even with the money that Sakura-san had given him, and the small pile of coins that the shadows in Mementos dropped at his feet, it was better safe than sorry. The litter was a shelf lower, and infinitely heavier than the box it was meant for. It weighed as much as Morgana did, of that he was nearly certain, and his knees threatened to buckle as he placed it inside of the litterbox, carrying the load with both arms clenched.

The food, both dry and wet, made up for their weight in their price. Piling the items into the box, he tallied the total inside of his head and stopped all too soon. Akira was, regretfully, unknowledgeable when it came to pet care, though he doubted that three cans and a bag of dry food would last Morgana very long.

It was mildly off-putting, and infinitely more embarrassing, approaching the counter with his
meager purchases. The feeling was only amplified when he double counted the total, sliding coin after coin towards the other side of the counter. The man standing opposite to him said nothing, though Akira was unable to miss the growing glare that had his finger shaking as he slid over the last half of his payment.

“Would you like a bag?” The cashier asked, sweeping the money into his hand with the other.

Akira shook his head, piling the items back into the litterbox and quickly, or as quickly as he could, heading towards the exit.

The cool, albeit polluted, air of Tokyo was slammed into his heated face, chilling the clamminess that had accumulated around his neck. The lights of the city seemed all too bright and he averted his gaze from them, towards the endless grey of the sidewalk under him. A sense of calm washed away some of the anxiety of his recent encounter. Flower petals and reflective puddles served as his walking stones as he attempted, in vain, to recreate his steps towards the station. Fortunately, though, he did find an entrance to one, with few stares and a narrow entrance; nearly the opposite of the entrance to Mementos.

Pausing, he rested against the wall, and pulled his phone from his pocket, double-checking the MetaNav, then closing it just as quickly.

The station was emptier than it had been before he left, but still bustling with similarly-dressed people. He approached the station’s gates and checked the massive map displayed in front of the turnstiles. Trailing the lines, he found that this station wouldn’t be able to take him straight to Yongen-Jaya, but one stop away was Shibuya station, nearest big station, which would easily take him to his destination.

He, along with a stream of others, crowded onto the bus headed towards Shibuya-Central once the next train arrived. With the quick loading and unloading of people, he was left without a seat; but with only one stop to go, he found that he didn’t particularly mind, even if the weight of Morgana and his supplies were starting to become too much. When the train stopped, Akira didn’t walk onto the platform as much as he was corralled onto it by the other passengers, carefully blank strangers escorting him carelessly into an empty spot in Shibuya-Central where he remained until he spotted the appropriate line for Yongen-Jaya.

A small line formed where the train’s doors would appear in two minutes, and he joined the small number, standing at the end of the line and trying his best to appear as if his legs weren’t about to collapse under him.

Two minutes passed painfully slow, then another stream of people boarded the train. It was, save for the people that had been in front of him in line, noticeably empty. The train called out their destination, and Akira found himself slumped in a chair, waiting for the time to pass along with the landscape. His feet pulses painfully with the rumble of the tracks, the satisfaction of finally sitting down remaining completely mild as he was propelled towards Café LeBlanc at a nauseating speed.

The train hissed to a stop at the Yongen station. Akira pulled his schoolbag over his shoulder, lifting Morgana’s weight carefully, then, less carefully, the litterbox and food. The train’s doors clapped shut behind him when he stepped onto the platform, and was gone in the next instant. Nobody else had gotten off with him, and he found himself surrounded by the all too strange silence of Yongen-Jaya.

Buildings faded together in the mute darkness of the small, nearly rural area. The darkness, however, put him on edge in ways that it hadn’t before, particularly when he passed a darker looking ally. He sneaked past it, listening all too intently for a faint whisper or growl that preceded
a shadow striking out. One paranoid thought avalanched into him almost sprinting towards the café, the night seeming to close in around him until LeBlanc’s bell rang above his head.

Akira opened his eyes, unsure when they had closed and more unsure how he had navigated here without seeing. Letting out a sigh, he pulled the café’s door closed behind him and stared out the door’s glass, past his reflection and into the streets.

Nothing stirred.

“You’re back.” Sakura-san greeted him. He turned around slowly, mindful once more of the living being hanging off of his shoulder.

He nodded in return, staring away from Sakura-san directly, and towards the hand of a customer at the bar in front of his caretaker, distracting himself with black gloves maneuvering the handle of a coffee mug.

Sakura-san cleared his throat, “Head upstairs.” He ordered, “Place is still open.”

Akira nodded once more, turning his gaze away from the customer and towards the more familiar tiles of LeBlanc’s floors.

The steps creaked noisily under his sore feet and when he reached their apex, he gratefully set down the litterbox on the table next to the railing. His schoolbag was quick to follow, Morgana’s weight lifting off of him and onto the sturdy table. A sigh of relief hissed into the empty attic, and another one emptied out of him when he finally collapsed onto the bed, almost instantly soothing the pressure that had been closing in around his head. He made a note to himself to set the litterbox and food out when he woke up, which was the last coherent thought he had before he folded his glasses up and set them on the shelf near his bed. His phone was quick to follow. He was tempted to leave it unplugged, the weight in his arms begging for the additional seconds of rest before he found the energy to shove the cord into the port.

He was asleep in the next moment.

Fire strikes down upon him as soon his eyes are shut. It sparks into the blank atmosphere, and he lifts his arm to protect his face from the heat.

There’s shouting. It’s behind him, in front of him—surrounding him, yet he can’t make out the words.

The flame returns. When he lifts his arm to block the intense light, it comes at him, at first an intense pressure then it worsens, growing painful, the flame growing brighter.

There’s screaming; he’s screaming.

He shoots up, ignoring the heaving of his chest and the burning muscles inside of it. Gripping at his arm, Akira lifts the appendage into the square-shaped moonlight that’s peering inside of the attic. He runs his fingers over its surface from elbow to the ends of his fingers. There’s nothing but skin, no sensation other than the one he initiates.

His hands drop onto the mattress, then curl around his legs as his knees fold under his chin. As his heartbeat slows down, his eyes begin to prickle painfully and compensate with a moistness that trails down his cheek and soaks into his jeans.

More tears follow, soaking into patches on his knees uselessly. He can’t seem to stop, though, can’t ease the calm back into himself. He continues to cry, sniffing until his nose decides to leak as
well, hiccups interrupt his breathing, stuttering the flow of air that refuses to settle down.

He weeps for minutes, perhaps hours, with no idea why; with no valid reason other than his body feels like it. Then, when it’s over, when the urge to snuffle and wipe at his face subsides, a wash of calm unclenches his heart, but refuses to let him sleep.

Lifting his head from the pillow, Akira folds the blanket off of him and steps onto the attic’s floor. It creaks noisily underfoot, sounding thunderous after the endless silence of the café, but doesn’t faze him as he navigates across the space.

Blindly, he dips his hand into the still open zipper of his schoolbag. His hands meet abundant heat and the pulsing ridges of Morgana’s expanding spine. He pulls away and, more carefully, navigates into the café.

The café is darker than usual, yet there’s light still on when he walk pasts the bathroom. Peering around the corner, he spots a figure.

Sakura-san. He identifies quickly, easing some of the anxiety that had begun to well inside of him.

He watches the other man for a moment, bent over a large pot, wondering if he should just return upstairs and have another attempt at sleeping.

Instead, he continues to watch. He’s not sure for how long or why he stopped debating it.

Sakura-san turns towards him, glances away, then instantly back up at him. Behind his glasses, his eyes narrow.

Shit… He thinks, just before the expression mellows.

“Couldn’t sleep?” His caretaker asks, before throwing something into the bubbling pot. The smell of spices envelops the café before Sakura-san had time to stir the pot. The man looks back at him.

Akira shrugs and watches as Sakura-san’s eyes roll.

“You got home pretty late,” He comments, spooning another ingredient into pot, “Not causing trouble, are you?”

He shakes his head, and Sakura-san nods stiffly at him.

“Sit down, will ya?” He orders, gesturing to the bar with a ladle, “You’re making me nervous, standing there like that.”

He considers objecting, to returning upstairs without a word, but finds himself sitting at the café’s bar, in his usual morning spot in the middle of the night.

“You eat today?” Sakura-san questions, voice loud from around the corner. The man’s head pokes around the corner and Akira nods his head; Sakura-san nods back, then disappears around the corner before he can catch the man’s reaction.

His stomach clenches at the thought of food. Had he eaten today?

The events of the day pass by in a blur at the front of his mind—meeting up with Sakamoto and Takamaki, which turned into running around with Skull and Panther, resting outside of the station with Morgana, shopping alone then returning to LeBlanc.

Surely he had consumed something during all that.
His insides twisted, a reflection of how it felt to enter the Metaverse. Akira grabbed at his stomach, still expecting pain to flood through either of his arms and finding himself tensing at the remembrance of his experience with Kamoshida and with Sakamoto—with Skull. Glancing down at his hands, mere outlines in LeBlanc’s shadow, he finds them shaking.

A sudden pain reverberates through the bones in his arm and he finds himself stifling a gasp as it dies down in the next instant; the phantom sensation gone as quickly as it had come. Just as it had been in his dream.

His throat hurts.

Sakura-san places a plate in front of him, the strong smell makes his insides squeeze together painfully when it hits him and he snatches the glass of water that the man sets down in front of him, their hands nearly colliding with each other before Akira pulls it towards his mouth.

The smell of flames die down as the water’s coolness quenches the dryness in his throat. The muscles pulsate still, a persistent heat and pressure that keeps dragging him back to Mementos.

Another plate slaps against the heavy wood of the café’s counter. The first thing he notices is the discrepancy between their portions; his being the lion’s share and Sakura-san’s looking to be for someone much smaller than himself.

He looks up from the counter, from the plates, with a question but Sakura-san’s attentions are taken up by the remote control in his hands, then, subsequently, the television hanging from the wall.

Akira drops the subject, as well as his spoon, and swallows down small portions of the curry and rice. The aroma is only second to its flavor, and he wishes, despite himself, that it tasted bad, or at least only decent. He finds himself continuously lifting his, still uninjured, arm, shoveling more into his mouth; his throat and stomach protest, both tightening and attempting to rebel the ecstasy of the meal, and his bruised cheek burns its way into his attentions, the only recent injury that hadn’t been erased from the healing magic that Morgana had performed on him.

The lurching in his stomach dies down after sometime, leaving only the burning afterthought in his useless throat as he continues to swallow down Sakura-san’s curry. The sensation leaves him confused, the stillness from within rather than the sinking feeling he’s been feeling non-stop as of late. Its absence is enough to remind him how exhausted he is, and how bone-deep fatigue can reach.

“You been taking that stuff that uh, the doctor dropped off?” Sakura-san asks, dipping his spoon forcefully into his rice and lifting it just as hard. He glances up at his caretaker’s face, but finds LeBlanc’s darkness, as well as the glare peering into the man’s glasses from the television’s light, Akira has a difficult time find anything gleaning in the expression; though he wasn’t sure if it was sure if it was due to Sakura-san’s ability to conceal his emotions exceeding his own ability to read them, or if the previous factors were doing all the work for the older man.

He finds himself nodding, anyway, gripping his hands against his guilty conscious. The lie makes his stomach drop and finds himself sitting up straighter in an attempt to combat the feeling.

If Sakura-san sees through his lie, he doesn’t comment on it. The older man continues to feed himself his own meager portion without looking at the plate, his gaze narrowed in on the late night news. He uses the man’s distracted state as an opportunity to swipe the remainder of his meal down the sink. The curry and rice swirl down the drain in a rush of water, and he quickly washes the dishes he’s used, setting them to dry with the rest of the identical looking ones in the rack.
beside the sink.

In the small corridor that separates the attic and bathroom from the café, Akira turns around and bows his thanks before heading back up the stairs to grab his hygiene items and quickly locks himself in the bathroom with the water running. With damp paper towels, he wipes down the grime and sweat that had long since dried from their descent into Mementos and reemerged from his unfortunate dream. Bending his head into the sink, he scrubs at his oily scalp with the tips of his fingers, hoping the still warming water was enough to rinse out the flakes of shattered hands and oil that had built up over the afternoon. By the time he got around to brushing his teeth, he was having a difficult time keeping his eyes open, even with the bathroom light shining right into his eyes.

Sakura-san made no reaction when he emerged from LeBlanc’s bathroom, drying the dripping ends of his hair with paper towels. Akira took the silence as a dismissal and quickly found himself in the café’s attic once more, standing in the moonbeams that shone through the attic’s window. The now-used paper towels are balled up, and placed on the shelf beside his bed, quickly lost in the oblique shadows of the room along with his other belongings.

He rolls onto his other side, removing the pressure from his still swollen cheek, and quietly falls into the oblivion of sleep, the epitaph of Mementos, and the fire it burns under his skin, is left behind for the time being.

The ringing of his phone sets off the alarms in his head, shifting the black of his eyelids to the dimmed grey of the attic’s wall before he finds himself sitting up. From within, the small number of personas within him stir in outrage; from across the room, a high-pitched groan emits from his schoolbag. When he turns off the alarm, Morgana’s voice filters down until it is barely recognizable from the sounds of percolating coffee and the murmurs of the customers downstairs. Inside of him, Arsene’s voice calls out over the small storm of different voices, silencing them and Akira is suddenly alone in his head for the first time since he’s awakened to his power.

Checking the time, he catches in his peripheral as his bag jolts in place before Morgana’s outline appears on the floor with a quiet thump. There’s three new notifications on his phone when he checks, but doesn’t open them before Morgana is on the bed beside him. The cat’s fur is in disarray, sticking up at weird angles and looking generally untamable; not dissimilar to Sakamoto’s own hair, he notices. Morgana blinks a few times, sneezes directly onto the sheet below them, thankfully missing the hand between them, then stares up at him with a large, blue gaze. His expression is unreadable, and Akira finds himself returning to his phone instead of attempting to continue investigating the morphing feline features beside him.

One of the notifications had been a message from Sakamoto, which was abrupt in nature, but ultimately pointless.

The second had been of more interest. In bright white letters, Phantom Thieves.

Followed by the last notification, Ann Takamaki added.

His initial reaction was very subdued, still addled by sleep, but considered it to be a necessity if things were going to continue as they were; if they were going to continue operating as phantom thieves.

Nothing else had been posted in group chat since Takamaki had been added, though he wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“Phantom thieves.” Morgana read aloud, having somehow scooted even closer while he had been preoccupied. Akira shrugged in response, throwing the phone down onto the mattress as he took to
his feet. Crossing the attic’s space, he ran his hand over his uniform, which had been hanging since he’d gotten home on Saturday. It was surprisingly dry, but unfortunately wrinkled in a way he wouldn’t be able to mend before he had to catch the next train. Piling his, now also dry, notebooks, and the dry-erase board into his schoolbag, his attention was quickly caught by the purchases he had made the night before with the money they’d made in Mementos.

Sighing, he pulled open the corner of the litter bag and dumped about half into the plastic bucket it had been resting in. With that done, he glanced over his shoulder, then did a double-take. Where his phone had been, Morgana’s back was now turned to him. The shadowy tail the cat possessed was flicking back and forth airily. He considered it to be a small mercy, not having to bother with instructing Morgana away as he began tugging off the clothes he’d slept in and pulling on his school uniform; but he did keep his gaze discreetly pinned on the bed across from him, hoping that Morgana wouldn’t choose an inopportune moment to turn around.

Fortunately, that anxiety died down as he pulled on the Shujin blazer, completing the outfit except his shoes. Glancing, once again, towards the bed, he found Morgana’s position unchanged, and he crouched down in front of the shelf that held his personal belongings. He pulled out a pair of socks and quickly dressed his feet in them before shoving on the stiffened leather of his school shoes. They stuck to the floor slightly when he paced to the other end of the attic once more, announcing his presence, though Morgana hadn’t seemed to have taken notice, as his tail continued to swish loftily until Akira was right over him, shadowing the cat an even darker shade as he reclaimed his cell phone.

He glanced at the screen, taking notice of the half composed message before glancing back down at his companion, whose expression had soured. The white ovals that composed his eyebrows were tilted downwards, flattening into rectangles while the eyes below narrowed deeply. “Hey! I was using that.” Morgana whined, the pitch of his voice at odds with the venomous expression he’d equipped. If he wasn’t in a particular rush, such as the one he was in now, he might have given the cat an explanation on item ownership. Instead, he clicked the lock button on the device and slid it, and Morgana’s half-message, into the pocket of his uniform, and strode downstairs with his toothbrush.

Keeping his gaze, and hopefully presence, away from the customers, Akira quietly locked himself in LeBlanc’s bathroom and quickly attempting to groom himself. His hair refused to cooperate without a brush, and he wasn’t necessarily in the mood to run upstairs and risked being yelled at by Sakura-san. Instead, he patted it down, accepting that it would remain rather fluffy for today. He returned to the attic, putting his hygiene items back into his box and exchanging it for his schoolbag. He dragged it off the table, only to find it expectantly heavy to the point that it tumbled to the attic’s floorboards.

The bag yelped and Akira instantly recognized his mistake.

Pulling open the sides of the bag revealed Morgana’s tense form. The cat glanced up at him but refused to get out of the bag when he pulled it open further.

I hope this doesn’t become an everyday thing… He complains silently, adjusting his stance as he pulled the bag over his shoulder to compensate for the additional weight. Morgana, for his part, remains still and mostly quiet as he makes his way back down LeBlanc’s stairs and towards the café’s exit. When he turns to shut the door quietly, he spots Sakura-san through the glass within the door. His caretaker doesn’t beckon him back inside, merely nods in his direction before turning away from him. He’s unsure what to make of the interaction, but doesn’t dwell on it like he might have a few days earlier; Sakura-san was quite enigmatic, in his opinion.
Stepping past the rows of metallic shoe lockers of Shujin Academy, he notices, almost immediately, that something past the blur of students had been altered. However, it’s not until he’s walking past the school store does it actually click inside of him; the lack of red through the bustle of the students around him. The endless stream of calling cards that Sakamoto had somehow produced, and somehow plastered around the entire school without being noticed—something that Akira was beginning to question, were all absent. Once he had begun to notice, he found himself unable to stop searching. Casting his gaze around the school’s corridors, he searched for a sign that they had been here two days prior.

Finally taking notice of the amount of attention he was drawing, Akira ducked into the classroom, his face warm from the sheer number of curious, yet malignant, gazes that had pinned him down. Takamaki is already in the seat in front of him when walks down the last aisle of desks and takes his place by the window; she doesn’t notice him walk past, or if she does she doesn’t take an interest in his arrival. Unfortunately, the student that sits behind him is already there as well, though his attentions are absorbed in a green-covered book. He uses the distraction to escort Morgana inside of his desk, using his school bag to keep stray glances from spotting the transition.

He slides the mostly empty bag under his seat and pulls out his phone from the pocket of his uniform.

He unlocks it and finds Morgana’s half-written message once again. Deleting it, he begins drafting the first message in the group chat, finding himself oddly apprehensive and checking over his word usage more than is probably necessary before hitting sent, tacking on Morgana’s message towards the end in a rather clipped fashion.

“All of the calling cards are missing. Morgana says hello.” In the next instant, from in front of him, a phone chimes loudly enough to draw a few stares before the roar of the classroom picks up as if it hadn’t been disturbed. He spies Takamaki digging into the pocket of her own uniform and pulling out her own phone. She stares at it for a long moment, then her hair flicks over her shoulder and she looks at him with one eye. His fingers latch onto a lock of his own messy hair, twirling the dark strands, his gaze falls to the desk below him. When he musters the courage to look back up, Takamaki is no longer looking in his direction.

“I heard that Kamoshida cancelled practice for the volleyball team and made them shred every one.” The message had stemmed from a silhouette of panther, no doubt Takamaki, and was quickly followed up from a skull motif.

“Sounds like something that asshole would do.”

The chat quiets into silence after Sakamoto’s message, and class starts soon after with Kawakami stepping into the room. The lines in already stern expression were amplified by dark, familiar looking circles around her eyes. She called role quickly, not looking up from the clipboard until she called his name. She glanced up, her stare boring into him for a long moment, before she checked him off and began her lecture.

Kawakami didn’t ask many questions and was quick to dismiss herself several minutes before class was actually supposed to end, leaving the quiet room to escalate in volume in her absence.

Akira pilfered his phone from inside of his desk and glanced at the new messages that had shown up.

“Kamoshida isn’t here today.” That in itself shouldn’t have been cause for suspicion, but considering the multiple warnings that Morgana had beat into them before starting their operation, he couldn’t help the spike of negative emotion that splintered through his chest.
Did Kamoshida lose all his desires? He pondered the question quietly, tucking his phone back into the desk. According to the man’s shadow, everything had worked out faultlessly when Takamaki had threatened him. Besides the defeated expression that he adopted as he had thrown his crown towards them, Kamoshida didn’t look traumatized, didn’t resemble the empty shell that the rumors depicted.

If anybody was sharing his doubt, nobody spoke up about it.

He spent lunch alone, lingering on the stairway that lead to the roof where Sakamoto had dragged him into Kamoshida’s business. It wasn’t an ideal situation, the stairs were hard against his butt and dug into his spine, but it was quiet and kept him out of sight, which was ideal. He doubted that anyone would find him unless he made his presence known. Using the solace, he worked over the information that Morgana had provided them prior to their confrontation with Kamoshida’s shadow. Everything had gone according to plan, or at least he thought so. They’d sent the calling card, defeated Kamoshida, and stolen the treasure. All without being crushed under the collapsing castle of the man’s twisted desires. Yet Kamoshida was nowhere to be found, no sins confessed, no crimes atoned for.

It was making him nervous, even though he’s not sure what he should be expecting. For all they know, Kamoshida could have gone to the police station instead of Shujin. It was a logical conclusion. The more he thought about it, however, the more vivid the sight of Kamoshida’s prone body, unmotivated to eat, to breathe, to live, became in his head.

Someone pinned him to the hallway on his way back to the classroom, when he opened his eyes, he almost expected to see Kamoshida from behind his glasses. It wasn’t; it was Sakamoto.

“Did I scare ya?” The blond asked, the tilt of his face was serious and gloomy, not dissimilar to the expression Kamoshida had adopted when he’d been called into the man’s office.

Hesitantly, he nodded in assertion. The grip clamping onto his shoulders loosened considerably and he felt like he could breathe again, despite still being effectively pinned.

Sakamoto clears his throat, “Sorry ‘bout that.” The blond takes another step backwards, releasing him altogether and Akira can breathe again.

“Have you heard anything, yet?” Sakamoto’s voice drops in pitch as he begins to whisper, “About Kamoshida?” He casts a glance in either direction of the hallway and Akira does the same, spotting several people staring at the two of them, but they seem far enough away that it’s unlikely that they’re hearing anything Sakamoto is saying, so he finds his attention locked onto the blond’s shirt. A long column of red travels up from Sakamoto’s waist, boxed in by the lapels of their matching blazers. It’s not an obscene amount of the same shade that had decorated the halls a few days before, but it’s enough to quell the anxiousness of Kamoshida’s absence that had been building inside of him.

“You don’t think we… y’know?” Sakamoto makes a crude, yet vague gesture with one hand, “I mean, Morgana said he’d be fine, right?”

The weight against his side squirmed, lurching forward forcefully enough that he almost lost his balance before Morgana’s head ascended from a gap in the half-closed zipper. Again, his eyes darted around the hallway, hoping that the other students were more preoccupied with discussing him rather than the pair of large blue eyes that glared from the schoolbag under his shoulder.

“Is that what you’ve been worried about?” When he glances down, Morgana’s head is craned backwards and staring right at him. The oceanic tint of his pupils are slanted and upside down, but
the glare is instantly recognizable.

Akira shrugs his shoulders, lifting Morgana up slightly as he did so. He wasn’t aware that he’d been projecting enough for Morgana to take notice.

Morgana’s attention drops from him, instead he converses directly with Sakamoto, sharply affirming that nothing hadn’t gone as they had planned it. Akira toed at the edge of a floor tile with his shoe, erasing a skid mark that he’d been standing on. It took up most of his attention, enough that his teammates’ hushed conversation filtered into the buzz of the hallway. A pair of bright white slippers stepped in front of him just as he’d erased the remaining edge and he glanced up, caught Kawakami’s gaze, and quickly dropped his attention to the floor. His whiteboard was still in the classroom, not so much at Morgana’s insistence than annoyance with the stiffness of the object; and he wasn’t sure how his homeroom teacher would react to him pulling out his cell phone in the hallway, so he hoped that she would avoid stirring a conversation with him.

“Perfect timing” She said, instantly hushing Sakamoto and sending Morgana back inside of the bag, “Study hall will be held instead of P.E. today, I’m letting you know in case you hadn’t heard. Kamoshida-sensei has taken the day off.” It was the first time Kawakami had been anything but straight to the point with him. He wondered if it was due to Sakamoto’s presence or the stream of students and staff that were avoiding walking in front of either of them.

Beside him, Sakamoto perked up, standing taller than he’d been just a moment ago, “H-he ain’t here?” The surprise was evident in his tone and Kawakami took a step forward, drawing the bubble they had created even closer.

Crossing her arms, Kawakami replied in a quieter, conspiratorial tone, “Don’t tell anyone that you heard this from me, but we’ve received word that Kamoshida-sensei is placing himself under suspension…” The woman in front of them sighed loudly, “It’s such an important time before the tournament, too. When Kobayakawa went to talk to him about it, but he supposedly wasn’t making any sense.” The tension that had been steadily creeping into the atmosphere hit its crescendo at her last remark. Akira swallowed down, hard, and hoped that his expression didn’t reflect anything guilty.

“A suspension?” Sakamoto’s yelped out.

Kawakami shushed him, glaring at both of them, “Not so loud.” She whispers sharply; at the reprimand, Sakamoto’s face goes carefully blank, his face smoothing out like a mask. Instantly, he’s reminded of Mementos, of Skull’s betrayal and the broken hearing aid that’s sitting in his pants at home. His arm flares in pain that he knows isn’t real and he backs himself against the wall, grasping at his skin through his uniform, digging the blunt ends of his fingers into himself until he separates the memory from reality.

In front of him, Kawakami takes a step back, “Also, there’s an assembly this afternoon during last period regarding…” she pauses, “Regarding Suzui’s accident, in the gym. Please be in attendance.”

When she looks down at him, Akira nods dutifully. Sakamoto does the same, though he can see the shift in the boy’s mood as if it were physically affecting him; the tension building itself inside of his slouched form. Something about it makes him nervous, though he knows he has no reason to be, not outside of the Metaverse.

Morgana wormed his way out of the bag once again, peering into the hallway for a moment, then back up at him. He wouldn’t know it, but he was almost certain that a flicker of doubt had warped Morgana’s features before the cat quickly concealed his expression.
“That was strange, wasn’t it?” The cat questioned, one of his front paws escaping the confines of the bag to rub at his face.

Akira nodded quietly, still processing, still clawing at his arm.

Beside him, Sakamoto stepped away from the wall he’d been leaning against and more towards him and Morgana. The expression of shock that had been there before dropped into an unreadable frown, “Looks like somethin’ happened.” He comments darkly. “At least it sounds different from a mental shutdown.” He supposed that was true, from what little he had heard from the line between Yongen-Jaya and Shibuya, none of the shutdown victims called in before they caused their accidents or death. It seemed, from what little they had to go on, mere speculation—though Kawakami’s speculation was more likely to hold some validity to it than his own—that Kamoshida’s desires, most of them at least, were still intact.

“Guess all we can do is wait.” Sakamoto sighs out. Below them, Morgana nods firmly before slipping back into the bag’s opening.

During his next class—now study hall, Sakamoto relays the information to Takamaki in their group chat. When he looks up from reading the messages himself, he finds her staring at him over her shoulder once again. Her gaze, this time, averts his faster than his does.

“Did you hear about the assembly this afternoon?” Her voice carries out under her breath and the words are directed towards the floor.

When she glances up at him, he nods, feeling uncomfortable. Takamaki had been friends with Suzui; even though she hadn’t seen the pictures inside of Kamoshida’s castle, he had a feeling she knew why the other girl had cast herself off of the roof.

She turns away, after that, and doesn’t speak with him again until their class is headed towards the gym. Despite the considerable alphabetic difference in their two names, she somehow ends up right in front of him.

“Do you think Kobayakowa will talk about Kamoshida?” She whispers to him.

Akira shrugs. He doesn’t know what kind of person Shujin’s principal is, but it seemed, from what Kamoshida told him in his office, that the school was covering his actions in exchange for his benefits to their prestige. He rubs at the still healing bruises on his cheek, still resembling the facsimile of Kamoshida’s hand.

Their class files in right next to Sakamoto’s, the blond sticking out where he notices his presence almost instantly amongst the number of other students. He supposes the same thing can be said about Takamaki, as Sakamoto quickly weaves through the crowd of his classmates and ends up standing next to them.

Another wave of students filter into the gym, filling it completely, letting the roar of whispers grow even louder. All of it does down, however, when Kobayakowa steps onto the stage and stands in front of a podium with the Shujin logo on it. His face, under the gym’s lights, is glowing almost distractingly bright.

The man leans forward, the sound of his quick, shallow breathing echoes through the speakers all around the gymnasium. “Let us begin this school-wide assembly.” His voice wavers distinctly over the static of the speakers. “As you all may know, a tragic event has taken place on these school grounds the other day.” He pauses, as Kawakami did hours before, “On Friday morning of last week, Suzui Shiho attempted suicide on campus last week. Many of you may have known Suzui-
chan. Spoken to her, or seen her during one of our school’s volleyball games as a starting player. It
came as a surprise to us all that she felt like this was the best option for her—fortunately, though,
she has managed to pull through, though she remains in critical care at the moment.”

Kobayakowa clears his throat into the microphone, “As you may well know, the students of this
school, of any school in this country, are the f-future for this country. Shujin Academy has been
known, for many generations, to produce many leaders that have shaped this country that it is
today; it is important, not just for yourselves, but for everyone around you, that you consider the
importance of your own lives. The schoolboard, and your teachers, as well as myself, felt that, with
the increasing rates of these… *incidents* occurring across the country, felt it was necessary to
inform you all of your options regarding stress or… m-mental difficulties, that you may be facing
due to your workload or living situations. A-as such, we’ve invited a guest speaker today to…”

The speech was interrupted by the gym doors being wrenched open, then slamming shut. Akira
hadn’t noticed the sound so much as the subsequent wave of gasps that followed. Leaning on his
tiptoes, he attempted to locate the source of the reaction, but was unable to see past the sea of
uniforms in front of him. Instead, the information came slamming into him as rumors began
filtering through the collected student body.

“Kamoshida…” Takamaki whispered towards Sakamoto, whose teeth gritted together loud enough
for him to hear over the whispering students around them.

Kobayakowa, who had no trouble seeing the doors from where he had been standing, huffs into the
microphone.

“K-Kamoshida-sensei, what are you doing here?” Echoes throughout the room.

Kamoshida’s voice manages to reach him, even over the mass of bodies in front of him. “I… have
been reborn.”

*Reborn?* He questions, apprehensive.

“That is why, I will confess everything to you all.” Kamoshida’s voice moves around the perimeter
of the gym, and through the gaps in the students around him, Akira is able to spot glimpses of the
man; of the husk Akira was terrified he’d been turned into. When the man takes the stage, blocking
out Kobayakowa and the podium, he takes in the mess of limp, greasy hair, the slouched posture,
and the defeated expression in his face that he’d only seen in that lost moment in the Metaverse.
The timers and whistles around his neck rock like pendulums, counting the seconds before
Kamoshida opens his mouth again.

“I have, repeatedly, done things… that were unbecoming of a teacher.” The stopwatch around his
neck swings again, “Verbally abusing students, physically abusing my team, and… Sexually
harassing female students.

It swings back, “I am the reason Suzui Shiho tried to kill herself.”

Somehow, through the haze of his confession, and the endless wave of students surrounding him,
Kamoshida’s gaze falls onto him; he finds himself unable to look away from the piercing stare,
captured in the malignant gaze of his enemy—his former enemy. “I… released the record of a student
to the student body.” His gaze shifts a fraction to Akira’s left, “I was the one who attacked
Sakamoto Ryuji, not the other way around.”

“I… coerced Takamaki Ann into a relationship with me.” As Kamoshida’s gaze sweeps across the
room, more sins continue to spill from the man’s mouth, each more vile than the last. Despite the
horrified silence in the room, nobody steps forward to stop the man from confessing.

Finally, Kamoshida falls to his knees, his form convulses almost unnaturally as he sobs, “I thought of this school as my own castle, and I am… truly sorry for putting such innocent youths through such horrible acts.” The man in front of them chokes over his own words and cries, “I am an arrogant, shallow, and shameful person…”

Kamoshida pauses, “No, I-I’m worse than that!” The man that had threatened to execute all of them throws himself forward, bowing to all of them “I will take responsibility for my actions, and kill myself to repent.”

Hearing those words breaks the silence that had tranced the crowd in front of him.

Behind him, Kobayakowa rushes over to Kamoshida’s shrunken form. “K-Kamoshida-sensei, please remove yourself from the stage.”

Another teacher calls out, “Everyone please return to your classrooms; this assembly is disbanded as of now!”

Akira turns around and begins to follow his own class out of the crowded gymnasium, but pauses when he hears a familiar voice shout over the others.

“Don’t run, you bastard!” Takamaki shouts, causing the lines in front of him to pause as they turn and look. “Shiho is still alive! Even after all the things that made her want to die.”

Her foot stomps onto the ground, sending a sharp crack into the air that makes his face flash in pain, “You have no right to run from this!”

Kamoshida, in between his thunderous sobs, responds, “Y-you’re right… I should be punished under the law… to atone…” He sighs loudly over the still circulating whispers, “As of today… I resign from Shujin Academy, and will turn myself into the police. Please—please call the police!”

“Wow…” Sakamoto’s surprise comes from right beside him.

Akira nods appraisingly, shocked beyond himself; inside of him, he can feel smugness that isn’t his own, radiating from Arsene.

The gym doors are pushed open, and more faculty yell at them to evacuate, their voices more stern than before.

The rumors swirling through the hallways shift from Kamoshida’s confession to the calling card, then finally the Phantom Thieves; and, despite himself, he feels his body stiffen in an attempt to keep from reacting.

Just ahead of him, Sakamoto’s form does the same, making the blond stand taller as he glances around the advancing march of students. Sakamoto looks back at him, a large smile is beaming on his face. Akira isn’t sure what to make of it.

“A-plus job then, huh?” The blond calls over the rush of gossip around them.

He shrugs. Something about Kamoshida’s confession made him uneasy, even if appeared to still be normal, the fear that his desires would turn to ash, that he’d become like the other mental shutdown victims. It worried him, more than he would like to admit.

Takamaki didn’t return to the classroom until minutes after the rest of them had returned, and he
didn’t find out why until another moment after she sat down as she started to text him directly, instead of using their group chat.

“She’s the other girls came up to me and apologized for spreading rumors about me…”

He read over the message twice, then a third time as Kawakami began lecturing them about avoiding suicide, and he still wasn’t sure to respond.

“That’s good.” He eventually sent.

“I guess, not like any of it matters though. Shiho got her justice, and that’s good enough for me.”

He didn’t respond, but another message showed up, this time in the chat that the three of them were in.

“Are you guys busy after school?”

Sakamoto replied almost instantly, despite all of them still being in class.

“Nope.”

“I’m Why?”

“I think we should celebrate!” Takamaki revealed, followed by a happy looking sticker.

“That sounds good.”

“Akira?” The use of his name made him uncomfortable, but he ended up responding to Sakamoto’s message anyway.

“Sure.” Sakamoto followed it up with the same sticker that Takamaki had used earlier; a stark contrast to the skull motif he used as an avatar.

A minute passed before his phone lit up inside of the desk and he checked it right as Kawakami dismissed their class.

“D’ya think the Phantom Thieves will be famous after this?”

“I doubt it.”

“I mean, it’s just a teacher admitting that he’s a creep.”

“You know?”

Sakamoto doesn’t respond.

His phone doesn’t light up again until Takamaki drags him out of the classroom and towards the stairs, heading up instead of down.

“We’re on the roof.”

“Already? My teacher is still nagging about not being disgraceful to the school.”

Takamaki sends back a picture with its tongue out; Sakamoto doesn’t reply.
The girl beside him continues to drag him across the roof, and doesn’t release him until they’re standing at the fence that’s supposed to prevent incidents like Suzui’s. He stares out, towards the horizon that’s blocked by the scaling buildings of the city, taking in the sights. His gaze, inevitably, sinks down, though, to where Suzui’s body landed. Where the girl he’d met only once, but seen in pictures hundreds of time, had almost died. Something in his chest tightens painfully; he looks away from the ground.

“Do… do you think there’s more palaces out there?” Takamaki questions eventually, breaking the fragile silence between the two of them.

Akira looks back at the girl and shrugs. Morgana had heavily indicated to that being the truth.

The bag under his shoulder squirms, and, as if summoned by his own thought or by Takamaki’s voice, Morgana’s head grows out of the open zipper of his schoolbag. “It’s a high possibility.” He says, almost cryptically.

From the corner of his eye, he catches Takamaki nodding, the pale shade of her hair picking up streaks of orange under the sun’s light.

Her mouth opens again, but instead of words, the sound of an opening door catches in his ear and Akira looks back to catch Sakamoto walking up to them, a grin still creasing his lips.

“Yo!” He shouts, despite the closing distance between them; the volume causing several birds to fly off of the roof.

Takamaki smiles too, as if Sakamoto’s cheerful expression were contagious. “Hey, Ryuji!” As if the use of his name affected him as much as it did Akira himself, the blond pauses a few meters away, then continues to advance, the grin he’d had seeming miniscule compared to the one that was now blooming on his face.

“So what should we do to celebrate?” Sakamoto questions once he’s close enough, slinging an arm around both of their necks. The sensations is warm, and heavy.

“I have a feeling…” Takamaki says, seeming unfazed by the added weight on her shoulders, “That you’d say, ‘ramen’ if I asked you what you wanted to do.”

Sakamoto splutters noisily, causing Takamaki to laugh in response.

The weight on his frame increases as Sakamoto starts to laugh as well.

His knees collapse under the strain, folding under him as they decided to stop coordinating.

Suddenly, he felt exhausted.
Leave a review. :) and tell me something interesting about yourself.
The pillow beneath him is threadbare and worn; soft to the point of discomfort. It’s not the type of thing his parents would keep around the house—not unless their opinion on useless, opulent things have changed since the last time they’d come home.

It takes him a full minute to realize that wasn’t, in fact, at home. Then another to realize that he wasn’t even, technically, in Japan anymore.

His eyes ripped themselves open despite the complete exhaustion weighing down every part of his body. Seeing the ceiling stop and turn into a blank slate of smooth, affectless stone revives the last memory of where he’d been—meeting up with Sakamoto and Takamaki on the school roof. The sky’s blue is difficult to imagine inside of the almost mirror-like glaze of the solid foundation, the endless skyline—only disrupted by massive buildings—is limited to just above him; if he jumps, he thinks, he could most likely reach the ceilings water-like trance with the tips of his fingers.

That is, of course, if it weren’t for the ball-and-chain connected to his ankle; grounding him, quite literally.

Moving his eyes inside of their sockets causes an intense burning he doesn’t recognize as the need to blink until his body forces him to do it for him. When they reopen, he notices first, that his glasses are missing; a barrier he doesn’t recall removing. His hands, moving blindly across worn, scratchy sheets—or what he assumes are an attempt at sheets—he doesn’t find the comforting ridges of the fake lenses. Across the room, something stirs, and draws his attention. His lack of glasses—of defenses; and sense of awareness—feel entirely stripped away. He tilts his head down, the angle bordering on uncomfortable, and stares at a massive gate that separates him from his wardens, Justine and… Caroline, and Igor, the proprietor of the Velvet Room.

His gaze casts out over the sights in front of him. The views in the distance are blocked by passive steel pillars—not dissimilar to the skyscrapers blocking his sky’s view—and behind that, lie to identically dressed wardens with a shared set of eyes; the girls’ eyes shine bright amber, even in the shadows cast over their faces by the lip of their matching hats. It’s painfully reminiscent of the girl from the Metaverse; whose hearing aid was still in his jeans pockets. His heart clenches in reminder. In place of their missing eye, an eyepatch with a foreign character \( V \) glows no-less brightly.

It’s blinding; but not enough to distract him from the sneers that distort their faces when they notice, before he does, that he’s awake and inside of the Velvet Room.

He approaches them, still contained behind the prison’s bars, his right foot a good distance behind him as he can’t quite manage to drag the ball his ankle is attached to across a rather sharp crease in the floor’s design.

Igor begins speaking as soon as his hands make contact with the bars, using them for support in lieu of his leg.

“First off, I would like to begin by congratulating you, Trickster.” Igor’s thin, gloves fingers smooth out and mimic the motion of offering him a toast, “For breaking the first seal.”
First seal? His mind echoes, somehow still asleep despite being on his feet.

“The merging between our two worlds advances with your progress of taking down a palace of substantial size.” Igor continues, a sharp smile makes his lips crook awkwardly, “It will, no doubt, spark the turning point in your rehabilitation; as well as see a great increase in your power within both worlds, together.”

He frowns; confused.

Igor extends a hand in a grand gesture, before sniffling sharply. The man across the room retracts his extended hand, adjusts the handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket, but doesn’t bring it to his face; even as he sniffs again. In front of him, Coroline’s begins to tap loudly against the stone floor, sending solid, echoing beats across the rounded prison.

“Surely you have felt the increase in your power? The draw of your persona within your natural realm.” Igor questions, addressing him for the first time—seemingly—since they’ve met.

Even now, though, he can feel the faint pulse of Arsene’s—and the others—presence, from within him. The dull smoke of intrigue as Igor’s words grow more and more confusing.

Akira nods. From beyond the bars, Igor’s grin grows more massive, and he has a hard time, more than usual, looking the man in the eye.

“Excellent.” The man rumbles, sounding sinister despite the praise he’s offering. “As a reward, of such, allow me to bestow something upon you. You may find it useful during your endeavors, of that, I have no doubt.”

The prison falls silent, save for the persistent tapping of Caroline’s leather shoe tapping on the ground.

Before he can raise his hands in question, something drags him out of his own existence. Again, he is flooded with memories that aren’t his own. The visions, this time, however, are coated in a film of dark blues and blacks. Thick, rope like strands of white are the only things that draw his attention away from the varying shades of azure that seem to coat the world unnaturally. The glowing strand, when his eyes follow one to its end, finds a shadow-figure that he has a hard time identifying as human until it—she, he notes—steps into a light source, dismissing her shadowy pallor for one of bright, icy blue. The line, as he follows it again, thinking that he’s mistaken, winds back into this other person. The strands flow out of him, to the people he finds surrounding him. One catches his eye, blindingly radiant, more so than the others; it resembles a chain. Thick, glowing links chain together. The spikes adorning the flattened curves of each band keep him from running his hand over it. He follow it forward though, with his eyes and his heart nearly stops at the overwhelming surge of emotion that floods through him. The atrophy of exhaustion fades into pure, incomparable bliss; he’s not sure how to describe it.

The figure, coated in a blue haze like the rest of those around him steps forward, a frown marring her wide face. He catches a splattering of freckles, all cobalt under the alterations to his vision. The rest of her body, aside from the elegant features of her face are hidden behind dark hair and the girl directly in front of him. A sudden urge flares to life inside of him, and, despite himself, he grabs onto one of the chain’s sharpened bands. Akira knows, without a doubt, that he loves this girl; even if it’s only the first time he’s ever seen her face.

Igor guides him out of the azure memories with a chuckle. The sound kills all of the emotions that had been welling inside of him, the memory of gripping the chain like a rose with its thorns intact becomes blurry.
“That, Trickster, is called, in a rudimentary fashion, Thief Vision.” The man explains, crossing one leg over the other underneath his impressive desk.

He blinks a few times, somehow unused to seeing in all colors. Akira follows the gleam of his shoes rather than attempt to continue the façade of maintaining eye contact with the man.

“It allows one—a thief, the ability to see threats, items of interest, and of course… the bonds that the thief has made.” Igor’s hand extends forward, gloved palm upwards, “Come, Trickster, hone this new tool.”

The extended hand snaps, and his vision, as bleary as it had been before, shifts suddenly into the same gradient of blues and blacks from moments ago. “Excellent.” The man at the end of a small, almost imperceptible thread says.

“The power of your bonds, I feel, are still tentative; growing. But…” The blue facsimile of Igor waves his hand. The silken strand shatters, sending fractals of ivory onto the azure shaded floor below them. “Easily breakable.” He finishes forebodingly.

The thread, in the next instant, reemerges from thin air, connecting the two of them through the prison’s bars once more; this time, however, it is a fraction thicker, maybe a centimeter around, but more noticeable than before. His previous unease with Igor, which had spiked at the warning, drops down, lower than it had ever been. The instant change has his palms clamping up, and he’s quick to wipe them on his pants, still transfixed in the sights in front of him, as a thread, then two, emerge from somewhere within him. They’re quick to attach themselves, shooting out in wide arcs towards either side of the entrance to his cell, to the two wardens. When it locks onto either of them, burrowing inside of them, they turn in unison to stare at him.

“Our master has placed a great trust within you. It seems only fitting that we place the same faith within you.” Justine speaks first, softly as usual.

“Yes, we’re expecting great things from you, inmate!” Caroline is quick to add, jutting out her baton to rattle against his cage. She laughs when he jumps, startled.

“Of course, I trust you will find powerful allies using this new gift.” Igor says, silencing Justine and Caroline as they begin to speak. “With it, spotting those with the potential to be useful should go smoothly, I’ve no doubt…”

Somewhere, deep within the prison, though Akira has no way of knowing if it comes from above him or below, or even which side, an ear-piercing scream echoes off each of the Velvet Room’s walls, reverberating into his cell and causing him to clasp his hands over his ears, cutting off whatever it was that Igor was saying. It reminds him, fitfully, of the tortured students within Kamoshida’s cognition, but ends as soon as it begins.

“I believe that means our time is up.” Igor, once again, waves a hand towards him. As soon as his gloved fingers twitch, Akira finds the world fading into black.

When his eyes open the next time, an overwhelming since of vertigo overcomes him and the urge to vomit doesn’t relent until he rolls onto his side; it’s only then does he take notice of the sturdiness of whatever is keeping his head from the floor, causing his thoughts to drift back to his parents’ house in the country. The smell of the air is different from home, though, and he knows he isn’t there; he’s in Tokyo, under probation.

Akira sighs, feeling weary despite having woken up three times today.
“He’s awake!” A voice calls, somewhere above him. Suddenly, he’s hyperaware of multiple gazes lingering on his body and he pulls the panels of his school blazer closer around him.

“Joker!” A voice calls, just in front of his face, and he jumps from the sheer unexpectedness from it. The temporary nausea fades quickly, and he manages to pull his eyes open before the shock frays his sense of control.

Morgana’s face is just in front of his, the darkened contours of his expression are drawn wide and he has a hard time looking the cat in the eye before his gaze drifts towards the cement just beyond the messy curls hanging down his face. He wonders, rather idly, if he should start preparing to start waking up in strange places.

“Joker?” Morgana calls, still in front of him. Akira opens his eyes once again, wondering when they’d manage to close without him noticing. The voice startles him into awareness.

“Are you okay?” Another, more feminine, voice calls; when he manages to glance upwards, he spots Takamaki kneeling above him, the curls of her hair threatening to smack into his face as she darks even closer. Without warning—or permission—his hair is scooped back from his face, and a warm, damp pressure presses onto his forehead. “You don’t feel warm…” She comments. The heat is retracted, but he feels her fingers in his hair even after she drops the mass of it. The sensation isn’t something he’s used to, and borders on ticklish, but he’s futile to stop it.

His arms are too tired to ask her to stop—though, he doubts she’d understand anything less than a physical intervention. His back is too numb for him to consider adjusting the vertebrae, as uncomfortable as he is. His legs are asleep, tingling painfully under his school trousers and inside of the dark leather of his shoes.

His vision, once again, fades into a dark sheet. But he doesn’t pass out, and it’s not until he notices this that he realizes that the sky, his hair, and Takamaki’s hand had all turned varying shades of blue.

He sits up, then, panicked. Despite Igor’s words, seeing things like this—using the Thief Vision without intending to—was something he’s sure that he’s dreamt up, somehow. The world is still blue when he blinks, and remains that way until his eyelids start to tire from the effort. He keeps his eyes open, staring at the altered atmosphere, taking in Takamaki’s unreadable expression and watching her hand, still hanging in the air from where it’d been in his hair. In front of her, Morgana is a still rendering of his usual form. When he spots Sakamoto, just beside him, he wonders how he hadn’t noticed the other boy before. All of these things, even the loose gravel under his fingers, are cast in bright shades of blue. Except, of course, the tendrils of pure white that stick out of him, imbedded in one side of his chest and jutting out towards the other three in thin, white strands.

Knowing what he does now, he recognizes them for what they are—his bonds. Seeing that they’re there isn’t what surprises him though, he knows what they are after all. It’s seeing them connected from himself, to those around him; not the thief whose memories he had shared, and not within the Velvet Room.

He shared connections with these people; a bond between him and them.

His face, and chest—and underarms—all reacted to the suddenly realization with a sudden influx of heat. His cheeks warmed, burning hot against his face.

“You okay, dude? You’re lookin’ warm…” another force pushed against his forehead, rough and somehow warmer than his body was feeling.
Opening his eyes once more, Akira spotted Sakamoto’s arm pressed against his forehead. Everything was—thankfully—back in a full spectrum of colors, letting him forget about the things he’d just seen.

“You ain’t warm, little sweaty though.” Sakamoto diagnoses a minute later, pulling his hand back and wiping it on the place where Akira’s head had just been resting; he watches, as Sakamoto’s fingers wipe off his apparent clamminess onto his uniform’s pants. His face, already burning, blazes in both shame and embarrassment.

He’d been sleeping on Sakamoto!

Akira had seen a similar instance before, on a bus back home of tourists falling asleep on a local. He was one of those people!

Shame wins over, in the next instant, and he finds himself standing in the moment after, bowing his apology for the inconvenience before, shakily, heading towards the roof’s exit; Morgana would be able to catch up, hopefully bringing his now absent bag with him. He manages to get down one flight of stairs and onto the first year floor before his teammates are shouting for him to stop.

“H-hey!” Takamaki shouts, the sound of the roof’s door slamming shut serves as punctuation, “Akira-kun!” She barks.

His feet cement themselves to the ground.

*Probably for the best*, he deliberates, staring at the still lingering first years, now staring at him, then at Takamaki and Sakamoto as they dash out of the stairwell. *Drawing attention so soon would probably…*

 “…I’ll sue!” The memory plays back so vividly he glances around to make sure that he still wasn’t in the countryside. In the time it takes for him to reassure himself, Takamaki and Sakamoto are blocking the next set of stairs, towering over him despite the negligible differences in all of their heights. Morgana is cradled in Takamaki’s arms, with two school bags hanging from her arms; one crooked in each elbow that sway rhythmically as she catches her breath.

The threads are still there, distracting enough that he doesn’t hear what Sakamoto is saying until the world renders in color once again.

 “…Hello?” Sakamoto drawls out, waving a hand—the same one that had been on his forehead a few minutes ago—in front of his face. The blond’s leg is tapping, the same one his head had been—rather uncomfortably—lying on; the same quirk he had after long moments of silence within Mementos or in Kamoshida’s palace. Akira has the feeling he should say something, but his hands are limp by his sides; the faint feeling that had rendered him unconscious on the roof was threatening to override the adrenaline and embarrassment of the situation.

 “Dude!” Sakamoto finally shouts. He flinches, the reaction unavoidable, unlike the step he takes backwards.

Takamaki jumps as well, nearly tipping over the edge of the steps she’s guarding if not for Morgana’s weight keeping her forward heavy.

“What’s wrong with you?” The thunder is replaced by lightning, Sakamoto’s voice is quiet, but has an edge to it; one he’s keen to spot almost instantly through years of listening for it. Unlike the other times, though, he doesn’t have a response; nobody here can understand him, not without the barrier of his phone. Its weight is like a brick in his pocket but he can’t quite figure out how to lift
it, or what, exactly, is wrong with him; he’s confused even by his own actions.

It hits him, like the thunder of Sakamoto’s voice; the idea. He raises his hands, then stops, catching the numerous gazes still locked on him. Time has stopped in the hallway as first year students stare at the criminal, the delinquent, and Takamaki holding a cat.

Akira turns around, ignoring the confused—and Sakamoto’s outraged—reactions from his teammates, and returns to the roof.

He’s not distracted by the sky, or the horizon, or the gravel that crunches under his feet.

“I’m scared.” Akira says it quickly, fingers tingling, forbidden yet mandatory. “I’ve never had…” He hesitates, even after recognizing that they don’t understanding anything he’s saying. “I’ve never had friends before and I’m not sure what to do.” His feelings regarding Kamoshida, his past, present, or future, the Velvet Room, and Mementos are all ignored during his confession.

“Akira-kun…” Takamaki says, he catches something in her tone—she’s easier to read than anyone he’s ever met. It’s an almost sad expression she makes towards him, the blue in her eyes squints down and she wipes at them before turning to Sakamoto, who’s stunned still, looking stony, but not blank; though Akira has trouble identifying what expression the blond might be making.

“I think he wants to teach us, Ryuji.” Takamaki deduces, pressing at Sakamoto’s waist with her elbow, causing the boy to jump.

“Uh.” Sakamoto retorts, his face drawing up, “H-how d’ya figure?” He questions, Sakamoto’s pinning gaze is cast off of him. The two start whispering quietly between them, Morgana dropped to the floor, along with all of their school bags.

Akira twists around, letting himself get absorbed into the distance once again. He kneels by the fence that Suzui had climbed over. Looking at the same sight she had not even a week before. Tokyo really was beautiful, despite the smell.

A minute later, a hand presses down on one shoulder, followed by another on his other side. He turns towards the first, finding Sakamoto, then Takamaki appears in his peripheral.

“We want to learn.” She says, the teeth between her smiling lips shines under the overhead sun.

Sakamoto lowers down beside him, also smiling. “I guess it ain’t really fair that you gotta text for us to understand, y’know?”

“Hey!” Morgana crawls between the thin space between his folded up legs and manages to get in front of him, “How am I supposed to learn something like that?” He yowls, “I don’t have any fingers in this body!”

Akira pauses, wondering if he’s genuinely offended Morgana for a moment before Sakamoto and Takamaki start laughing, then cackling. They both end up on the floor, he and Morgana between them.

Morgana catches his eye, staring at him intently behind oceanic pupils.

Akira shrugs in response, pulling out his phone for the first time.

“I’m sure Sakamoto or Takamaki will translate for you. It’s not like you need fingers to talk to me, either. I’m not deaf.” He turns it around, letting Morgana get absorbed in his explanation.
The rod-straight quality of his tail droops towards the ground, curling into one of the fence’s pockets just behind him.

“I guess…” The cat mutters, looking away.

Akira feels guilty, but it’s not like he can give Morgana fingers.

“**I’ll teach you after we get your body back.**” He informs.

Morgana’s ears perk up and he, too, starts to laugh; though Akira doesn’t have an idea as to why.

He festers there, under the mild sun in the spring breeze, surrounding by his teammates, all of them still giggling with each other with him in the middle.

Akira presses at his throat, probing around his Adam’s apple with chilly fingers. The pad of his fingers slide down, over the useless contours of his neck. There’s a depraved, buried sadness that threatens to well up, but he drops his hand from his throat, and the feeling washes away. It leaves him wondering, with one last, poisonous thought, what his own laugh would sound like. He curls his hands around his knees, holding himself together with the gesture until the laughing—mocking—does down around him.

His teammates are in higher spirits than when he’d escaped from the roof, and smile at him when he glances in either of their directions.

“So, celebration first or tutoring first?” Sakamoto drawls, crossing both of his hands behind his head.

“Sensei.” Takamaki tacks on.

Sakamoto tilts his head back, looking at the blonde, “Huh?” He rebukes.

Takamaki winks at him, as he had any idea what it meant, “You gotta call him ‘sensei’ if he’s gonna be—wait a second…” The girl beside him rips his phone from his folded up arms, the contortion of his position making his reaction to slow to consider stopping the girl before her eyes rove over his two messages to Morgana.

“‘Sakamoto’ and ‘Takamaki’?” She squeals, offended but Akira really isn’t sure why; across from her, Sakamoto snorts, the blond darts his eyes over to him, staring.

“For real?” He groans out, “I told ya to call me by my first name—what is this, twice now?” The man beside him ponders, pulling one hand out from under his head to tap at his chin. A smile interrupts the frown that had been cast over Sakamoto’s face not a moment ago, then another laugh; this one considerably shorter than the last.

“Don’t you think, **Ryuji**” Takamaki interrupts, turning the laughing fit into a still silence. “That **Akira-kun**, should call us by our given names; since we’re friends and on the same team.”

Sakamoto shrugs in response, not bothering with words.

Akira’s face heats up, still, at the use of his given name.

Takamaki sighs, loudly, like Ryuji’s thunder but more gentle than the guttural shout from the back of his throat. “Please, **Akira-kun**, call me **Ann**” She implores, she laughs, under her breath and he has a feeling it’s an intentional doing, “I mean, it’s weird, you know. Having a friend call you by your family name, even when you’re fighting side-by-side against a guy wearing lingerie.”
He doesn’t bring up the fact that she turns into Panther when he refers to her in the Metaverse. Nor does he bring up the fact that considering using their first names is enough to reignite the blush threatening to crawl up his chin. He doubts it would change her mind.

Akira glances to his left, towards Sakamoto—Ryuji; then again to his right, avoiding eye contact with Takamai—Ann.

Instead, he nods slowly when she gazes at him expectantly, and she smiles brightly.

“Okay, okay!” She squeals, leaning in even closer, “How do I sign my name.”

He, briefly, considers offering Takamaki in response, but thinks wiser of it.

Akira juts a thump out, “A”, then drops his fingers towards the ground, opening them wide, “Ne.” It’s not a perfect translation, Western names more difficult to reproduce in writing—and, subsequently, JSL—but it would sound the same if spoken out loud by someone translating.

Takamaki—Ann mimics the signs slowly, then more quickly. “Awesome!” She chirrups, repeating her name several more times.

“Me next! Me next!” Sakamoto—Ryuji orders, sitting himself up again.

He folds his thumb over his pinkie and shows Sakamoto the back of his hand, the other boy mimics the motion, “Ryu.” Dropping the hold on his thump and folding in his ring finger, they both finish. “Ji.” It’s smoother, translates easier due to its Japanese origin.

His two teammates practice their names, then each other’s. Akira watches for a minute, then drops his gaze to Morgana, who looks intrigued.

“What about our codenames?” The cat conjectures, his lip curling up, revealing sharp canines. “I’ll admit, it will be useful being able to communicate without risking alerting any shadows.”

Akira nods in assent; he hadn’t really thought that far ahead, but he’s glad that somebody was.

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji hoots, staring at him expectantly once more, so Akira decides to do his first.

He grabs at his head, slowly putting distance between his two fists. “Skull.” It’s not elegant, and might be slower in the Metaverse than using Sakamoto’s actual name, but Sakamoto smiles anyway.

“It’s kind of like shampooing your hair, isn’t it?” Takamaki giggles, rubbing fingers across her own scalp.

Akira pauses, considering, before turning to her and rubbing his fist over his cheek in a circular motion; technically the word for cat, but he figured it was close enough.

She mirrors him as well, working small circles into her cheek while laughing, “Are you sure this is right?” She questions.

“You look like a maid café worker.” Sakamoto comments with a snicker, drawing his own fist over his face to mimic the gesture.

“Morgana next!” Takamaki orders him. He glances down at his roommate and teammate, Morgana’s oceanic eyes are wide, more so than usual; eager, is how Akira thinks he looks.

Pinching together his thumb and index, Akira exposes the underside of his rest. “Mo.” Then drops
his hand, forming an inverse victory sign, “Na.”

“Hmm.” Morgana hums in front of him, lifting a paw to reiterate the gestures. They come out crude, bordering on meaningless without fingers to articulate, but Akira finds himself nodding anyway, not wanting to upset him further.

“What about you, Akira-kun?” Takamaki inquires, “Your codename is Joker, right?” Morgana affirms for him with a nod that distracts Ann for a moment before the three of them are staring at him once again.

Akira extends his flattened hand, “Jo,” then pushes out his three first fingers, sticking his thumb between the two others. “Ka.” Another rough translation.

“If you want, you could make your own sign for your codename. It’d probably raise complications trying to remember them inside the Metaverse.”

Ann gapes at him, having read it first, “Y-you can do that?”

He shrugs in response, extending his phone to Sakamoto.

“Sweet!” The blond turns his attention towards Takamaki across from him, “Better think of somethin’ before you get stuck with maid café.”

Akira sits between the two, letting them deliberate and rehearse the few signs he taught them while he stares off into the distance. Morgana is sitting in his lap, staring off too. Nothing particular catches his attention, he’s brain slightly overwhelmed with the strange warm feeling that’s thrumming under his skin like a second heartbeat. It’s distracting, pulling him out of his city-watching, but also out of his memories; leaving him trapped in the moment, listening to Sakamoto’s blasé cursing and Ann’s scolding in response.

Takamaki groans. “I can’t think of anything!” He glances at his phone, they’ve been on the roof for almost two hours.

“Same.” Ryuji sighs out, leaning back on his hands and looking up towards the cloudless sky.

“What time is it, Akira-kun?” Ann questions a moment later, breaking the spring’s silence as soon as it starts.

He turns the screen towards her and the blonde jumps in response, “That late?!” She screeches, pushing herself into standing and gathering her things before running towards the roof’s door. Wrenching it open, she looks back at them before calling back, “Sorry! I gotta—work thing!”

Akira wasn’t aware she even had a job.

“We can celebrate tomorrow, yeah?” The blonde doesn’t want for either of their answers before she’s stomping down the stairs. A minute later, Akira can see her running past the school gates below them, her light hair making her as easily identifiable as the way she rushes through the slowly moving crowds around her.

“I should get goin’ too,” Sakamoto says as Ann disappears around a corner. Akira glances towards him, nodding. “Ma gets worried if I’m not home before dark.” The blond rolls his eyes but there’s a smile pinned onto his face, leaving Akira unsure if the boy is actually annoyed or not.

Ryuji takes to his feet slowly, gasping sharply when he puts pressure onto one of his legs. Then juts a fist towards him. For a moment, Akira thinks it’s going to collide with his head, but it stops
an easy distance away from him. Instinct makes him flinch away, and if Sakamoto notices anything, nothing in his expression gives it away. The fist lingers, extended towards him for a moment before he recognizes the gesture.

A broad smile works its way on Ryuji’s face when their fists collide. Akira pulls back his hand, letting it settle awkwardly on Morgana’s back.

“See ya.” Sakamoto calls from the roof’s door before it slams shut behind him.

He lingers on the school’s roof, watching as Sakamoto strolls past the school’s gate, his pace as slow as the wave of people around him, but with bright hair giving him away as easily as Takamaki. He, too, disappears around a corner, escaping from Akira’s view in a moment. The warmth in him fades. He’s not sure where it came from, but he notices its absence as much as he notices the sweat dripping down his sides under his uniform, as much as the heat the Morgana was radiating into his lap.

Eventually, he gets up as well, leaving the roof behind. This time, there’s no students waiting at the bottom of the steps, staring at him with large, questioning eyes. No wary glances as he makes his way to the ground floor and out of the Shujin’s gates himself. There is, of course, a stream of people guiding him down the street, and another to lead him to the platform in Shibuya.

LeBlanc is still open when he pushes through the door. Despite the near silence in the café—only the coffee makers percolating and the television hanging on the far wall making any discernable noise—each seat in the place is taken and Akira does a double-take. Everything in Tokyo had been so loud, especially the people—his treacherous bath house experience proof of that—yet LeBlanc was quiet. Sakura-san looked up when he opened the door and quickly jerked his head towards the attic.

Taking the cue, Akira scurries up the steps; he didn’t expect, however, for his caretaker to follow him up and grab onto his arm.

He jumped at the contact before he was whirled around, coming face to face with his stern looking guardian for a moment before he dropped his gaze to the panels beneath them.

A sigh broke the near deafening silence that had been built up into the café, gruff from tobacco or maybe from talking to customers all throughout the day; he wasn’t sure which.

“But can you help out downstairs tonight?” Sakura-san asks, straight to the point as is each time his caretaker speaks to him.

Despite the bone-deep exhaustion that’s settled into his bones, he finds himself nodding towards the floor, knowing he’s not in a place to refuse if he wants to keep a roof over his head. Defying authority figures hadn’t really been his strong suit anyway. He places Morgana onto the bed, hoping the comfort would be enough to stop the cat from trekking into the café while Sakura-san is there.

Sakura-san sticks him in an apron just as a line of customers comes walking through the café’s door. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen anyone actually walk in the place before. His guardian—now his boss, he supposes—hesitates for a moment before handing him a small notepad and pen. Identical to the ones he’d handed to him on his first day here.

“Write down what they want, make ‘em legible.” Sakura-san instructs, “Don’t worry about the prices, I’ll handle it after I make it. Got it?” His voice is low and close enough to his face that he’s reminded of Kamoshida’s office.
Akira swallows, taking the items and wondering why his hands are shaking.

All of the people who had walked in were male, all wearing the same thing with the same scowls on their faces. He approaches the one occupying his spot first, furthest from the café’s entrance, but closest to him and Sakura-san.

“House blend, plate of curry—I’ll be payin’ for these three as well.” The man says, waving a hand towards the similarly dressed men who walked in with him. He writes down the order as they come out, then sidesteps towards the next one.

The next man has a dark, piercing look underneath his bowl-cut. “I’ll have what he’s having.” His voice is darker and deeper than the look he shoots Akira; at this point, the stare is like a physical presence that he can’t quite shake off as he rewrites the same order.

He sidesteps again, still aware of the heavy stare from the second customer. “Blue Mountain; extra rice with my curry.” That's a weird name for coffee, he comments, writing down the order as clearly as he can.

The fourth customer on the order is as ordinary as the first, wearing a dark suit with dark, slicked-back hair. His cheeks are unnaturally red when he asks, “What’s good here, Akinari-kun?” Akira panics for a moment before realizing, as the man leans on the counter to confer with his companions, that the question wasn’t aimed towards him at all.

“Just get the house blend, Daiki.” The second man says, his gaze still on him; Akira shudders, staring more forcefully at the notepad in his hand.

“Guess I’ll have the house blend.” The man laughs, slamming a hand on the bar as he does so. He jumps, and the café seems to do so with him. Swallowing, he writes down the final order and tugs the sheet from the ream.

Glancing around, Akira spots part of Sakura-san around the corner, hidden away inside the small kitchen. The man is dumping ingredients inside of a large pot and the smell splashes into the air as much as it does onto Sakura-san’s apron. He doesn’t look like he wants to be interrupted, but seems to notice he’s being watched and turns to look at him. Akira steps forward and hands him the order. Sakura-san takes it without a word and sends him back into the café with a wave of his hand.

An elderly couple approaches the register as soon as he turns around. If he’s not mistaken, they had been in the café when he left for school that morning, though he has no way of actually knowing.

“Oh.” The wife says, not looking up from her purse. “I wasn’t aware that Sojiro hired a part-timer.”

He doesn’t dispute her claim, instead he nods quietly. Bowing with a smile, not dissimilar to the girl from Big Bang Burger had done when he’d walked in the day prior. He takes her check and money from her shaking hands; the math is easier to manage than getting the cash register behind the counter, but he does manage to get it open and offer her change; only for her to refuse it, insisting on leaving him a tip as a welcoming gift.

Akira puts the money back in the register, only for her to scold him into stuffing the yen into his apron pockets. He does as requested, and is given a wrinkly smile for it. The man next to her, presumably her husband, chuckles airily and quickly escorts his wife out of the café. He bows to them once again before they disappear out the door.

He puts the change back in the register as soon as their faces disappear from the door’s glass panes. When he turns towards the group at the end of the bar, the man is still staring at him and Akira
loses his gaze on the rack of coffee beans behind him. The door opens again, though, drawing his attention as another group is quick to fill the table that the old couple had just deserted. Two parents and an equal number of children.

“I’ve seen this place a dozen times walking from the station.” The wife says, “Never thought to walk in until I smelled whatever it is you’re cooking.” The husband laughs when she does.

Akira smiles; the curry really is something special, aromatic not even beginning to describe it—when he can keep it down, that is.

They order the curry, as predicted; Sakura-san scowls deeply when Akira hands him the order.

*Probably because they didn’t order any coffee,* he justifies, maneuvering platefuls of curry onto the bar and avoiding Sakura-san as he comes in right after with steaming cups of coffee. The rest of the afternoon and most of the evening follows the same pattern.

It’s been dark for a few hours before Sakura-san tells the rest of the customers to leave, though at this point it’s only the group of businessmen and another elderly couple still lingering inside. The man that had been staring from before shoots him a last glance before disappearing down the corner towards the station; Akira shivers, nerves fried after endless hours of standing and avoiding conversations while taking orders.

Sakura-san locks them both inside of the café with a flick of the lock after spinning the sign to *Closed.* The older man leans against the door, and sighs wearily.

He starts to dismiss himself to the attic, but Sakura-san stops him before he can ascend the stairs.

“Stick around and clean up—I uh, wanted to talk to ya before I left for the night.” Akira nods, picking up a broom to brush up the mess around the table.

Cleaning continues silently between the two of them until Sakura-san deems the place clean enough, then slaps something onto the counter as Akira is putting away the mop. The noise causes him to flinch, thunderous in an otherwise silent, almost lethargic, café.

“Good work tonight.” Is all Sakura-san says before strolling out of the door, “Lock up behind you.” He couches from the doorway. His guardian is gone in the next moment, lost in the darkness beyond LeBlanc’s glass window.

*Behind me...* He questions the turn of phrase, then turns his attention to the items Sakura-san had slammed onto the counter. On the otherwise clean counter, lay a golden key, the ridges of it worn into a dull brown. Most likely to LeBlanc. The other was a card of some sort. Arsene made his presence known then, a flicker of intrigue as Akira pinched the card between his fingers to pull it from the bar’s smooth surface.

**Yongen Onsen! PASS**

It made his heart stop a little, recalling his previous attempt at using the facility. An event that Sakura-san didn’t know about.

*He’s being nice.* It was more likely that his guardian was saying thank you, repaying a debt that Akira wasn’t owed, than showing consideration.

Still apprehensive, he still ended up going to the bath house and presenting the pass; LeBlanc locked up behind him using the key Sakura-san had left him. He didn’t use the actual springs this time, though, instead choosing to dart into the sectioned off showers and quickly wiping himself
down with complimentary soap and shampoo that smelled like tea leaves before getting dressed in his sleepwear and locking himself back into the café, avoiding the look of the attendant as he left.

Morgana was waiting at the top of the stairs by the time Akira made it across the café.

“Joker!” Was called as he pulled himself up the wooden steps. “Ryuji was calling you on the phone-box.” He informed.

Akira flicked the light off and climbed into bed, Morgana following just behind him, a dark shadow in an even darker room. The phone was like a miniature sun shining right into his eyes as he opened Ryuji’s messages.

He doesn’t remember what any of them said, however, falling asleep just as they begin to load; the burning of his retinas not tethering him to consciousness, nor the questioning calls of Morgana as the cat tumbles over him.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a review.
I BEG of you, please draw the PT doing JSL for cat; consider it a Christmas gift for your shitty author. :3c
The next morning started similar to the last. Waking up covered in sweat, expecting it be blood splatter and a searing, unbearable phantom pain railing up his arm. He scrubbed off the evidence of his nightmares, swallowing compulsively until the squeezing burn in his throat died out, and attempted to leave the café with Morgana under his arm, the cat refusing to be left behind even when Akira couldn’t muster the strength to carry himself, let alone his teammate.

Something snagged onto the back of his collar as he pushed past LeBlanc’s door, choking him so suddenly that a disgusting squelch pushed out of his mouth before he could stop it. The snagging continued, firmer, until Akira was forced to walk backwards or fall onto his ass, and probably Morgana. He backpedaled until he was almost at the edge of the café, then was, none too gently, shoved into a bar stool. The impact startling him enough that his vision swims blue. He gazes around the café for a moment, but is inevitably drawn to the strands of pure white darting out of his guardian’s chest.

“Sit.” Sakura-san says, even though he’s already seated. The older man wraps around the bar and stepping into the kitchen; not even bothering with looking at him, preoccupied as he is with the pot in front of him. Akira is distracted too, by the strand, about as thick as wool, that’s connected the two of them.

Morgana peeks out of the bag, “Joker, what’s going on? I thought we were leaving.” He glances down at his teammate from the corner of his eye, catching the appearance of another beam of light hanging loosely between them. Another bond.

What is going on? He questions, sliding over until he’s in his claimed seat then putting his bag into the one next to it.

Sakura-san steps back behind the bar, then sets down a plate in front of him. “Didn’t see you get dinner last night.” His guardian says, almost conversationally, as the man all but shoves spoon into his hand; but his tone is like gravel and it makes him sit up straighter in the barstool, uncomfortable.

Akira looks down at the food in front of him, his stomach gurgles painfully when the aroma hits his nose. Under Sakura-san’s intense gaze, though it’s half-hidden behind his glasses and a coffee cup, he digs into the portion. Just like the last time he’d had it, he’s surprised by how it sits on his tongue. The subtly, pleasant heat that trails through his mouth and all the way down. It’s sweet, too; creamy. It makes him want more, even when his plate is empty and his stomach is expanding painfully, giving him cramps until he’s certain he’s going to throw up.

He doesn’t manage to finish the small mountain of rice that Sakura-san had piled onto his plate, nor does he get close to seeing the bottom of the plate.

His guardian pulls the plate away from him as if his fullness is written on his face. Akira hope he can’t.

“Don’t miss the train.” Is all the man says, handing him a glass of water as well.

He nods in response, even when his mouth is attached to the glass, gulping down water to quell the
uneasy feeling in his stomach; though it only serves to make it worse.

“That was strange.” Morgana comments once the café’s door shuts behind them.

Akira shrugs. Things have been stranger.

The train’s doors begin to close before Akira is even halfway through the doorway and he ends up falling into an empty seat with his momentum. Morgana yowls at the jostling but settles down soon enough when Akira sets him onto the bench next to him.

“Can’t make it today, either.” Takamaki says as soon as he’s on the platform just before the block Shujin is on.

The school is tense to the point that the spring air is casting a sweat-induced glaze over his skin. Every step he takes, he feels a number of eyes on him, more than when he’d first arrived. He half expects Kamoshida to be behind them all, spreading more information from his record as he’d admitted to doing, but the man is absent entirely.

“Lame.” Sakamoto answers as Akira is stepping into his classroom.

“You still have that medal Kamoshida dropped, right?” Ann asks privately. His mind draws a blank, though, and he ends up looking towards Morgana for an answer, putting the screen down in front of him as class begins; he hadn’t thought about the medal since Morgana had brought it home around his neck.

“Does anyone else hear a cat?” Kawakami questions at the same time Morgana says, “It’s at home.” His shoulders tense up on reflex and he does his best to look not guilty as Kawakami’s suspicious glare wanders across the classroom.

Takamaki looks back at him and Akira nods.

“Why don’t we sell that medal Kamoshida dropped and we can have a bigger celebration over break?” She asks the both of them.

“As long as there’s meat.” Ryuji sends back before logging off. In front of him, Takamaki snorts.

With nothing to do after school, Akira doesn’t pack up his things, or Morgana, as quickly as he normally might. He’s doing just that when a shadow dawns over the dry-erase board he’s attempting to shove past Morgana’s bulky frame.

“K-Kurusu-kun?” The shadow asks, when Akira looks up at the call of his name, he spots a mostly-familiar face, but is unable to draw a name.

They have the same Kamoshida-shaped bruise on their cheeks, but the boy in front of him was the same who’d taken a volleyball to the face during the rally the week before.

The guy swallows loudly. Akira looks away from his the purple splatters on his face.

“H-have you looked at it?” He shouts. They both end up flinching at the sound and Akira drops his look to the guy’s fidgeting hands. There’s bruises on them too, though he’s sure those are volleyball related and not due to Kamoshida.

He pulls the board out from around Morgana, then digs around for a marker before he’s able to respond.
“Look at what?” He answers, tilting the board upwards.

“The Phantom A-aficionado Website. H-have you seen it?” There’s a strange look on his face, hidden behind the black eye and bruises, but despite the number of glances Akira shoots up under his bangs, he can’t seem to get a read on it.

He shakes his head in response.

“I’m the one who started it.” The guy huffs out a small laugh as he says it, running bruised fingers through the layers of black hair on his head.

Akira has no idea what’s going, even less so when the guy leans forward. The bruised fingers pushing down his dry-erase board. Shut up. The gesture says.

“You guys are the Phantom Thieves, right?” It’s whispered quietly enough that he’s sure the sound doesn’t escape the bubble the guy in front of him had created. Yet a bone-chilling tingle runs up his spine at the sound.

How did he…? Akira tries to school his expression into something hard and neutral, but the kid is already smiling. The bruise on his eye squeezes shut as his cheekbones raise higher on his face.

“I knew it!” He jeers, losing control of his volume.

They both flinch again.

“Sorry.” The guys says, but Akira just shrugs.

This isn’t good. Arsene snorts, just behind his eyes, causing the hair on his neck to stand on end. Nothing he’d done had drawn much attention; aside from yesterday’s incident with Takamaki and Sakamoto. Morgana’s presence in the classroom wasn’t enough to indicate anything about them. They hadn’t posted their names or faces anywhere on the calling card, yet somehow this stranger knew who they were.

“How” Akira questions, writing around the guy’s fingers.

He’s not sure what he’s prepared to do to keep this a secret.

“U-um, there’s rumors going around about y-you and Sakamoto t-threatening Kamoshida.” The kid explains, taking a step backwards, “It was all over the halls this morning, I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it. P-people think that that calling card thing was just a joke, but then K-Kamoshida actually confessed. So h-how did you do it?”

Akira stares at the hand still on his board, unsure what to do. If he told the truth, he’s not sure if the guy would believe him or what would come of that if he did. If he lied, that would complicate things as well.

“W-wait… I don’t want to know,” The guy says, using his free hand to wipe at his forehead, “I… I think it’s best if I keep this a secret a-and the less I know the better, right?”

Stunned, Akira nods, half-formed lies dropping into nothing.

The guy steps forward again. Akira wondered if he was more approachable when he was at a loss of words and unable to respond.

It’s quiet for a long moment, the sweat that had been building up begins to cool under the school’s
“I… did a lot of bad things when K-Kamoshida was around.” The guy says, dropping himself into Takamaki’s seat and leaning onto his desk. “B-but I already told the police I’d go to his trial and help convict him!”

The boy seems to sink down, looking as if he might melt onto his desk and Akira is still uncertain on what he should be doing.

“It doesn’t feel right, though, it doesn’t feel like enough to make up for what I did. To you… or Shiho… or anybody at this school.” He recognizes the sound of crying quickly, watches, uncomfortable, as streams form ridges over the guy’s bruised cheeks before he buries his face into his arms.

When the crying turns into sobbing, with loud hiccups that sound like they’re going to draw attention and paint a bad image for his probation, Akira considers leaving the boy there to cry on his desk. But the guy knows things about the Phantom Thieves, so he settles himself into his seat and pulls out his phone.

“Someone knows about us.” He informs, logging back in.

“What?” Ryuji questions at the same time Takamaki questions, “Who?”

Akira tries to pull for a name, but comes up empty, “He’s in our class… The one that got hit in the face during that rally.”

“Mishima?” Ann provides at the same time Ryuji does.

“I gotta go. Make sure he doesn’t tell anyone!” Ryuji sends right after, logging out again.

The guy’s—Mishima’s head pulls up, the crying settling down, and Akira puts his phone away.

“S-sorry about that, I was just thinking about Suzui and… that was really embarrassing, huh?” Mishima laughs again but the sound is swallowed up by another hiccup.

“I wanted to do something more to help, you know, so I made the website.” Mishima reels back, “B-but I didn’t tell my mom what it was when I asked her to pay for it, so she won’t find out. Promise!”

Mishima pulls out his own phone, then hands it to him.

The familiar colors of the Metaverse are morphed into a webpage that it almost resembled the MetaNav; black background with red text. He wonders if it’s a coincidence or if the Metaverse how manipulated Mishima somehow. The calling card Sakamoto had posted all over the school is in the corner of the page as well.

“I figured there’s a lot worse adults than K-Kamoshida out there, you know?” When Akira nods, Mishima continues more loudly, “It’s just… if people had a place to talk about their problems that something would happen, like the Phantom Thieves.” A smile dances around Mishima’s busted lip.

“There’s also a poll!” He shouts, but apologizing right after and switching to a whisper. “For the next target, so there’d always be hope that anybody who abuses their power can change, you know?”
Akira nods again, handing back Mishima’s phone as he does. He’d pass the website along to Ryuji and Ann, to see what they think of it.

In his lap, Morgana wiggles violently against the confines of the bag and Akira remembers something the cat had said.

“A name” A writes out, pushing the board closer to Mishima to read.

“A name?” He reads aloud, muttering while scratching at the cut on his lip. “You… need a name to do… whatever it is?”

Akira nods.

Mishima laughs again, “Alright! I’ll make sure to update the forums when I get home tonight.”

Akira nods again, the dread from before melting into satisfaction; Mishima would keep their secret and provide them with names.

“You’re not that bad a guy, you know that, Kurusu-kun?” Another laugh, Mishima stands as he does so, though. “I… gotta go, Principal Kobayakowa isn’t letting anyone off the volleyball team until the whole thing with Kamoshida is resolved.”

Then he’s alone in the classroom, and Morgana seems to sense it as he pulls himself out of the confines of his bag and pounces onto the desk.

“You think he’s trouble?” Morgana questions, his tail swishing lazily behind him.

Akira shrugs. They’d have no way of knowing until it was too late.

“That was good thinking, though, making sure to get names for our targets.” Morgana goes quiet for a minute, “Do… you think we can go to Mementos, today?”

He pauses, recalling their previous experience with Morgana ended up comatose, with Akira’s own struggle to stay awake. Without Skull or Panther, they might have not made it out.

“Please?” Morgana coughs into his paw; a very human gesture that reminds him of what they’re looking for.

They end up at the entrance to Mementos an hour later, another train delay causing a minor injury. The station assures them that the cause was not due to a mental shutdown, but his brain filters the intercom into static as he pulls open Mishima’s webpage. The poll was empty, but the forums were constantly updating as he scrolled through them. The entries started to blur together; how could so many pop up when the page was created yesterday?

He finally found one with a name, though.

Atsuhiro Kensei. He typed it into the MetaNav and was surprised at the confirmation his phone emitted, even more surprised when the world around them shifted, turning the blur of people walking past him into nothing but empty space. As he took to his feet, his body was swarmed in cold, blue flames and leaving him covered in familiar dark leather; seeing it’s sleeves leaves him breathless, apprehensive and anxious. Skull wasn’t at fault, nor is the blond here.

He side-eyes Morgana, hoping a similar spell doesn’t manage to overwhelm him.

“We’re here…” Mona observed quietly, remaining otherwise silent at his side, then around him as
he transformed.

Akira did his best to avoid engaging with too many shadows, instead letting them grovel or boast about their wrongdoings. Some of them sent shivers down his spine, but, resolutely, he drove past the majority of them until Mementos started to grow colder.

The flat corridor that leads up to the stone wall that Morgana insisted was a door wasn’t as devoid as it had been the last time they’d been here. Instead, a shadow stood in front of them, staring in their direction with bright golden eyes. The shadow was a facsimile of man, wearing a dark suit that blended into their surroundings, pillowing off of it, however, was dark, smoke-like ashes that swam around it like an aura.

“Come to stop me, have you?” The man barked, his voice deep and unsettling. He lifted a hand towards them, “After all I’ve done for the community? My community?” He cackles loudly.

“She deserved it!” The shadow shouts, “She did! She did! She did!” Stomping his feet, the shadow dissolves into a solid mass of opaque darkness before remerging as a different being. With dark wings and claws, the shadow swooped forward, threatening to decapitate both of them.

The man continued to lunge, grunting with effort as his mantis-like claws sliced through the air with an audible whistle. Akira did his best to parry each of the man’s attacks, circling around the platform’s empty space with agility he’d true self didn’t possess. With the man’s excessive attacks, he found no time to retaliate and Morgana was having difficulty landing a spell to gap the closing distance between the two of them.

Akira fell to the floor, lungs burning and heart threatening to bounce out of his chest. The beast took his stumble to its advantage, crawling forward until it was hovering over him, using its wings as perches as it spewed hot, rancid breath onto his face. One of the claws that had been barely missing him now hovered over his cheek, thin bristles on its end brushed against the edge of his skin.

“Can’t even keep your feet under you and you think you can stop me.” The creature hacks up a laugh, sending more of its rancid breath onto his face. Something wet lands on his cheek, just below the edge of his mask. “Fucking brats.” The claw suddenly trails down, pressing firmly as it goes. “I bet your blood tastes good, doesn’t it? Doesn’t it?”

“Zorro!” Mona calls once more, conviction heavy. The massive form of Morgana’s persona appears once more, sending a blast of wind that connects with the shadow’s still form. It skitters off of him and Akira coughs as he manages to stand back up.

Apsaras shimmers into being in front of him, creating a layer of frost around the still reeling shadow. The man screams, falling onto his stomach as his feet and wings start losing traction on the floor.

Morgana jumps forward, slashing the shadow across its side, causing it to explode in a splash of black mist and green goo.

“What a weakling.” The cat comments, wiping his blade on the reappearing suit the man had been wearing.

In the carnage, a man appears, translucent and frowning.

“Please, I need help!” He sobs into his hands, “I didn’t mean it! Any of it!” The light he had been giving off fades as he does, dropping behind something as the remains of his being begin
disintegrating. His presence cast off into Mementos’ endless howl. When he steps forward to examine the object, he pauses in his tracks as the ground beneath his feet starts to tremble violently. The door on the far end of the corridor *cries* for his attention and instead of picking up the object the shadow had dropped, he finds himself walking towards the glowing stone wall. Pressing a gloved hand to it, the wall glows brighter until he’s forced to turn away, then, all at once, the walls fold together like panels, dropping in on themselves to reveal another set of the station’s stairs. Like the others, Akira can’t see the bottom of them through the thick fog of Mementos.

Akira turns back to the body’s remains, and picks up the object the man had dropped after his confession. A wallet. It was brown, but worn white where it folded open. Inside was a single business card and a small stack of bills. He slid the card out, only to find it blank.

*Weird.* He observes, sliding the card back into place and the entire wallet into a pocket on his coat.

“*Updating…*” A voice called from within his pocket; his phone. “*Target not found.*”

So that was him, then… The request hadn’t said anything about blood lust, merely a creepy neighbor.

“Joker?” Mona calls. When he looks up, his teammate is standing in the recently revealed doorway, his sword slung over his shoulder almost casually.

He nods in response, following after Mona while trying to process what had just happened; he could have ignored that request. Would something bad had happened if he did? If the two of them had been too weak, would whoever posted about their creepy neighbor still be alive?

Mona transforms back into an oversized vehicle, one with far too many seats for just the three of them, let alone when he’s by himself. Despite the extra room, Akira folds in on himself as he continues to drive through the darkened tunnels of Mementos until they stumble upon another stone wall with the same glowing patterns on it.

“Try that thing again, Joker.” Mona suggests, speaking for the first time in hours.

Akira pushes his hand to the door, watches the glowing red lines and circles glow bright, then dim back to how they’d originally been. The door did not open.

Morgana growls, but didn’t unsheathe his sword. “We’ll have to come back another day then.”

He nods in response, letting Morgana navigate him back to the surface as he drove through Mementos’ tunnels.

When they resurface, the sun is starting to set and he falls asleep on the train home, nearly missing Yongen-Jaya until he’s startled awake by Morgana swatting at his face. He takes his bag and stumbles onto the platform.

LeBlanc is crowded, as much as it had been the night before, but Sakura-san pins him down into a seat with another plate of food, keeping watch on him even as he checks customers out. He’s still full from breakfast, but doubts that Sakura-san wouldn’t be offended if he openly disrespected the free food. Instead, he eats. Drinking water as he does so until slimy mouthfuls build up in his stomach and Sakura-san excuses him, snatching his plate away before throwing an apron into his face.

The meal hadn’t helped with his exhaustion, though. Nor did it stop the customers from staring at him strangely, a contrast to the night before, except for the singular expression. Not that they were
unkind, they just stared at him with familiar empathy in their eyes until Akira found something else to draw his attention; which was, mostly, the notebook in his hands. Sakura-san made the orders and he delivered them until the sun finally set. It died down when it got dark, a mass exodus until only a few couples remained, engrossed in the news on the café’s television.

When another half hour passes, and no new customers come in, Sakura-san leaves for the night, taking the rest of the customers with him.

Akira thinks about going straight to bed, but decides to take another shower at the bath house across the alley.

The attendant bows to him, recognizing him with a greeting, then waves him in.

He scrubs down with a scentless bar of soap and shampoo that smells like tea leaves, thankful that there's nobody else in here, disregarding the fact that he'd waited a number of minutes before the final man using the bathing area to finally leave. Turning off the water, he turns around to leave and nearly jumps out of his skin.

In front of him, the doctor smiles languidly, which turns into a laugh as Akira tries to cover himself, a heavy blush sweeping across his exposed skin. His face, especially, is warm; uncomfortably so.

“I recall,” She says, crossing her arms over her chest, “saying to you, ‘come by next week for further examinations.’”

Her foot taps, splashing the remnants of his just finished shower onto the floor between them. She's still wearing shoes-- something that makes the situation even more surreal than a woman's presence in the men's showers-- tall heels that snake up her legs and make her just taller than him.

Akira glances around the edges of the shower, towards the changing rooms which are also devoid of men, then towards the bath, where he can hear shouting and the sounds of water running; steam blocks him from seeing further into it. They're isolated, for now, until someone comes in through, at least. He takes a step back, letting his back hit the still damp wall of the shower and hopes that the doctor takes a step forward.

She doesn't. If anything, her smile grows even wider.

“Yet, here we are, a week and then some later, and no quiet little boys in my exam room.”

His hands don’t move from his crotch; she wouldn’t understand anyway, and his phone is still in the café; she’s cornered him and seems to realize as much.

“See you in a few?” She asks, smiling wide enough to expose most of her teeth.

Akira nods quickly, shivering despite how warm he is, now cold water still dripping off of him and onto the floor. She hands him a towel and, once he takes it, she’s gone. He sighs into the damp air, pushing his hair away as he knots the towel around his waist. He’s careful to keep his back to the wall as he makes his way towards his belongings; less so when he has a shirt on. He does his best to scrub the dampness out of the ends of his hair before dumping the towel in the bin and walking out of the bath house.

He’s certain it’s cursed.

Morgana calls for him once he’s on the steps, but doesn’t move from the spot on the bed that he’d left him hours ago.
Grabbing his phone and tucking it into his sleeping pants, Akira heads back down the café’s stairs, ignoring Morgana’s call once more, and locks the café behind him.

The clinic is just as ominous as it had been the first time he’d been, the bright neon still disorienting as he pulled open the door that lead into a small waiting room.

The doctor was behind the stall once he walked in and slid open the glass separating them as soon as she spotted him. “Come into the examination room, sir.” She offered with a wink. His cheeks caught fire once again, despite the sinking feeling in his stomach, and did as she told him; walking across the small waiting room and wrenching open another door.

“So,” She says, and Akira’s realized he still hasn’t caught her name, “How’s my favorite patient?”

*Favorite?* He echoes, pulling his phone out of his pocket once he’s seated on the exam table with the doctor in front of him.

*Fine.* He says; guilt licks sickly in his stomach, sloshing painfully. Even when he’s telling the truth, a part of him feels like there’s no right answer.

“Good, good.” She says softly, “But you’ll have to excuse me for not believing you, shirt off—pants too.” That smile is back, sharp and dangerous.

She doesn’t offer the illusion of privacy as he strips to his underwear, just watches him with an unreadable expression until she pulls a file from her desk along with a clipboard.

“Turn your back towards me.” She instructs. The paper covering the exam table crinkles loudly, the only noise in the otherwise quiet room, as he turns around, hooking his arms around his legs to expose his back to her.

Skin and nail brush down his back, making him shudder, following the lines of his scars where his skin is even more sensitive. “ Doesn’t seem to be much progress.” She says quietly, “Have you been using the medicine I gave you?”

Akira swallows and his throat clicks in the silence where his answer should go, but he shakes his head eventually.

Her tongue pops, “Tsk tsk.” Followed by a sigh, “What am I going to do with you?”

She turns him around again, using her hands instead of her words. She prods at his ribs, at his stomach and hips before taking his heartbeat. The metal is cool against his chest and he’s all too aware of how fast his heart is beating.

“Are you at least eating proper meals?” He nods.

“At regular times?” *Regular enough.* Another nod.

“Three times a day?” Hesitates, but nods.

She frowns, as if smelling his lie.

“If you’re going to lie to me, you should at least get good at it first.” Her tone is grim, but she laughs afterwards, leaving him confused.

She tugs at his arm and he releases the tension in it enough for her prod at it, pressing the skin back and forth along his bones, “I don’t think you’ll grow much more.” She says, serious once more,
“But if you don’t eat at regular times, multiple times a day, you’ll face many more complications than what you have now.”

The doctor pulls her hands away from him and picks up a pen from her desk to write down something on the file in her lap.

“What blood type are you?” She questions without looking up.

“AB.” She snorts upon reading it, a smile masking the knowledgeable look in her eye.

“Two-faced, shy, and mysterious.” The doctor delineates, continuing to write. “Just about sums you up, doesn’t it? Then again, I don’t think I ever bothered learning your name, did I?”

He debates leaving out his family name, knowing it would only make it that much easier for her to abuse her power over him. “Kurusu Akira.”

She mumbles his name under her breath, then continues to write, “Well, Akira-chan, I really don’t want to get the police involved, but you’re not giving me a lot of options. You’ll be a danger to yourself, no matter what your parents did to you, if you keep up like this.”

His skin prickles at the mention of the police, his face heats up at the use of his given name, and his stomach clenches at the casual mention of his parents.

He feels like throwing up.

Then she sighs, “The police being here would be an inconvenience to me, too, you know. So do us both a favor and start eating. Take the medicine I give you. Don’t you want to get better?” Her last statement hits like a truck; leaves him raw and uncomfortable. He should want to, but something is holding him back.

“Keeping a regular schedule is supposed to help with eating disorders.” She advises.

“I don’t have an eating disorder.” He interjects.

She shrugs, “Your parents starved you, didn’t they?”

Akira nods.

“And they’re not here, are they?”

He shakes his head, a stray drip of water drops onto his nose.

Smiling, she continues, “But you’re still not eating.”

“I forget.” Empathy washes away the smugness and the smile that had been built up in her expression.

“I-I see…” Silence, then a sigh, “Do you have friends? Any friends?”

He hesitates, ends up nodding.

“Tell them to remind you if you can’t remember.” He doubts he could find the means to bring something like this up to Sakamoto or Takamaki, but he ends up nodding anyway, doing his best to look engaged.

She sighs again, putting down the clipboard in her hands as she does so, “Put your clothes back on
and drink this.” In her hand is a clear cup that is stained orange from what’s inside.

He follows her first instruction, pulling on his sleeping clothes and embracing their comfort for a moment before he can look at the doctor again.

“What is it?” He questions, taking the cup in hand when she pushes it into his.

She taps her chin, “Think of it as compensation, for keeping this under wraps.” A wink.

He swallows it. Feels it burn and soothe, only to burn again.

Unconscious, he remembers throwing up, then gasps to life with an intense sense of vertigo as he pulls himself back up.

The doctor is writing again, “Twenty-six minutes. Vomited twice. Vitals unchanged.” She murmurs along with strokes of her pen.

“What was that?” He asks again, all but shoving his screen onto her clipboard.

“Special project.” She answers, “A new type of homemade medicine; you can go now, by the way.”

He doesn’t move. “What’s your name?” Akira’s not sure why he’s curious.

She glances down at the screen, pen paused, then up at him with another smile.

“Takemi Tae.” She keeps writing, “You’d know that if you read the label on the medicine I gave you.”

Chapter End Notes

Leave a review~
What did you guys for Christmas/Holiday?
(And what are you sending me? :) )
Sakura-san asks him to help out in the cafe the following evening and Akira almost declines. Just how he almost declined when Morgana beckons him back into the MetaVerse to check out the next door with only Sakamoto for backup. It doesn't open and Morgana is quiet on the way back to LeBlanc, merely telling him not to stay up too late when Sakura-san orders him back downstairs. The headache that the MetaVerse gives them, along with the bone-deep exhaustion, make the colors in the cafe blur together like an abstract painting.

When he passes out, he's not entirely surprised. Is much more so when he wakes up with his hand throbbing in pain and something prodding at his face.

Takemi’s sharp, purple fingernails are the first thing he sees when he manages to rend his eyes open. The digits pull away as he steps fully into consciousness and manages to sit up. The doctor is sitting on the edge of the chair that had been previously stationed at the desk in the corner, hunched over him and frowning in his direction.

He glances at his hands; finds it bright red with a set of blisters starting to sprout out of the curve of his thumb.

"Second degree burn." Takemi supplies leaning back and making the chair under her creak. When he glances in her direction, he spots Sakura-san behind her, looming quietly with his usual grim expression in place. A cigarette is hanging from his lips, casting sharp smelling clouds around the room. Ashes fall onto his apron and onto the floor, but it doesn't seem like the man seems to notice at all.

"You seem quite accident prone," Takemi says to him, throwing an arm around the back of the chair, "Even for a teenage boy."

He shrugs in response, unsure what to say to something like that.

Across the room, Sakura-san snorts into his cigarette. "He'll be okay, though?"

Takemi nods, not abandoning her posture to turn back to his guardian. Not even when Akira wish she would, just to keep her attention off of him.

"He'll be fine with some bed rest." She answers, then flicks a hand toward the empty shelves beside his bed where a large brown box is now taking up space. Something that hadn't been there this morning, "After taking those, he should be back to functioning normally."

"I appreciate you coming all the way out here, then, doctor." Sakura-san nods, but doesn't look less displeased. "Your next one will be on the house."

Face hidden from his guardian, Takemi smiles, a wide stretch of her dark-painted lips, "Of course." She winks at him; the makeup around her left eye folding in on itself, then, in the next instant reveals the dark gleam in her eyes. He's not sure what to make of it, is too tired to continue thinking about it after she takes her leave. She exits the cafe after giving Sakura-san her farewell. Akira can hear the door ringing as it's pressed shut, then he's alone with Sakura-san, who approaches the bed,
"You uh, feeling alright?" His guardian questions, flicking off the ashes of his cigarette onto the floor when he pulls it from his mouth.

Akira nods dutifully. He's not sure how he feels, isn't sure he's even awake; if this is all a dream he's made up to escape the MetaVerse's nightmares.

Sakura-san eyes him warily, but eventually nods, sticking the bud back into his mouth only to talk around it. "If you're ever... need a break when I need your help, I want you to tell me next time. Got it?" There's anger in his caretaker's voice, something he's quick to identify and he shrinks under it. Bobbing his head when his voice dies down, the muscles supporting it are weak from something. His head is still throbbing, made worse by the infinitely bright light from the attic's single light bulb.

"I'll uh, make sure not to mention anything about this to your parents, alright?" Again, he nods, only slightly stunned at the mention of his parents. He'd been in Tokyo for more than a week and hadn't heard anything from them.

"Had Sakura-san?" He questions, glancing up at the man from the corner of his eye. More ashes fall into the air between them, leaving him without answers.

"I'll let you rest." Sakura-san says eventually, taking to his feet with two loud pops of his knees. "I already closed the cafe, so it should be relatively quiet up here, but uh, here." His guardian digs into his pocket, pulling out one of LeBlanc's order pads as well as a pen. Ripping off the top page, Sakura-san hands him the paper. "If you ever have... an episode at school, the park, wherever, make sure to call me."

Akira nods.

"But don't just doing it for free rides," He says grimly, pointing the pen at him, "Got it?"

He bobs his head again; the thought hadn't even crossed his mind.

Morgana peels back onto the bed once the cafe's bell rings again, a shadow in shadows. The space next to where he's curled up indents as the cat climbs onto the mattress and Akira is able to make out the gleaming oceanic hue of Morgana's eyes staring down at him in the darkness of the room.

"Joker?" His teammate calls, a paw lurches forward, landing on his cheek. He can't muster the energy to swat it away or move it, so he tolerates it when Morgana starts pushing his skin around like Takemi had just finished doing. "Are you really okay?"

He's not sure Morgana's vision operates in the dark, but he nods into it anyway. Figures the cat must have gotten the message when his frame settles down next to him. Akira puts his hand over Morgana's hand, letting rise and fall along with his breathing, falling asleep in the next instant.

Ryuji hisses when he sees his hand the next morning. The blond had been lingering outside of the school gates before classes and quickly fell into step beside him as they climbed up to the second floor.

"Where'd ya score that?" He questions, pointing to his hand. The box of medicine that Takemi had left behind had dispelled the initial burn, but the blisters were still sore to the touch. "Looks sick."

Akira shrugs, not quite sure how ended up with the injury himself.
"Anyway, I gotta place I wanna show you after school." Sakamoto drawls, "So cancel any plans if ya gottem, okay?" The blond doesn't give him anytime to respond before he's shutting the door to his own classroom into Akira's face.

By the time he makes it to his own classroom and his own desk, the bell had already rung. He's not sure if he's counted as late or absent by the way Kawakami glares at him from the front of the room as she takes attendance, but she starts her lecture without a word to him. Akira takes that as a good sign, or at least, not a negative one. Despite the slack she seems to have given him, he finds himself staring out the window, not to the ground below, but into the staggering skyline that's still waking up.

He takes in more of it at lunch, on the roof with Morgana. They share the sight and Akira shares his lunch- inexpensive bread from the school store- until nothing but the wrapper remains. Even under the relaxing spring chill, he finds himself sweating in apprehension. Kamoshida's confession was still circulating around the school; the Phantom Thief website- as useful as it might be- was also becoming a regular topic in the whispers behind his back. Somehow, he and Sakamoto were being accused of threatening Kamoshida; Takamaki had been left out of the picture. Morgana too, obviously. The number of times he'd interacted with Kamoshida outside of the MetaVerse could be counted on one hand; all but one of those meetings had been in public.

Akira scrubs at the Kamoshida shaped bruise on his face, still purple but turning yellow around the edges.

Is this what it's like to be a criminal... The bell rang. He returned to class without answers, tucking Morgana neatly around his notebooks and disposing of their trash before making his way to the classroom. Hiruta-sensei clicks his tongue at him, but doesn't say much else until his lecture over the composition of hair begins. He grapples at his own hair, twisting and twirling a couple strands until they end up defying gravity, curling straight upwards; it's a habit he can't seem to stamp out, letting one hand mess up his already messy hair while the other takes half-decent notes.

"Ready to go, partner?" A voice asks, just before a massive black shape materializes on his desk, crushing his textbook and notes. The desk rattles loosely as the shape lands, causing Morgana to yowl loudly from within. The sudden appearance and the small scream are enough to make him jerk backwards, casting the classroom in shades of blue, the light from the windows making most everything easy to identify. The stark white strands, one shooting into the open end of his desk and the other to the shape on top of it.

Sakamoto.

Akira glances around the mostly empty classroom to make sure nobody had heard the sound that Morgana had made, when he finds that nobody is looking in their direction, he turns his attention back to the teammate on his desk, glancing up at him from beneath his messed up hair and tugging the familiar weight of his phone out of his pocket.

"Where are we going?" He asks. Ryuji echoes the question into the air as he reads it, but doesn't respond otherwise, merely slides himself off the desk and the things on it with him.

He picks up the textbook, slides into the cage under his desk and tucks the notebook into his bag before offering it to Morgana.

"Sorry, dude." Sakamoto apologizes. And then, "But uh, think of it as a surprise."

Ryuji's surprise leads him onto the platform closest to their school, then to the other end of Shibuya where Central Street is. The blond in front of him is the only thing keeping him getting lost in the
mostly familiar streets around him; he spots some signs he spotted on the way to purchase Morgana's litter box, as well as the Big Bang Burger they'd met at earlier in the week. Sakamoto is also the one keeping him from stopping in the busy street and taking all of Tokyo in; how busy it is, how bright it is, how it can smell both good and bad at the same time.

He avoids stepping in any spring puddles, fallen cherry blossoms, or any combination of the two as his teammate finally stops in front of an alleyway. Akira steps into and leans against one the tall brick walls when Sakamoto does; the blond rubs at his knee. It's a gesture that Akira is starting to notice more and more often as they enter and exit the MetaVerse.

Morgana squirms his head out of the opening under his arm, "T-this is the surprise?" There's a waver in his voice that Akira is surprised to hear, "A creepy alley?" The cat's voice is belted out loudly, a yell that his him wincing but doesn't seem to draw the attention of the stream that's passing in front of the alley they're propped up in, nor does it drag anyone out from within it.

"Quit yellin'" Ryuji yells, pulling his hands away from his ears, leaving the shorter ends of his hair sticking straight out, at least on the side that Akira can see.

"Then explain why we're here!" Morgana orders. Akira can feel a thump against his rib where the cat stomps a paw from inside the bag.

Sakamoto rolls his eyes, then turns more towards him, rolling his shoulder over the wall until his entire front is facing him. Akira drops his chin, catching sight of a singular rat dragging something along the wall they're leaning against.

"Ya know that model gun I handed you in Kamoshida's palace?" Akira nods; he's pretty sure he can identify the weight of it in his bag, tucked away in one of it's pockets. "Well, it was dumb at the time, but then it actually worked, ya know, like," Ryuji drags a hand away from where it's folded over his school blazer, mimicking the shape of a gun, "Bang."

Again, Akira nods.

"Well, I bought it from this place just around the corner." He explains.

"Oh." Morgana pipes in, "So you want to procure more guns to use in the MetaVerse?"

"Yep." Ryuji nods.

"I must admit, Ryuji, that's pretty good thinking." The compliment is sudden and causes Ryuji to make a strange enough noise that Akira forces himself to look up.

When he does, he finds Sakamoto covering the lower half of his face with one hand; an inverse to the mask he wears, though it does nothing to conceal the blooming color that spreads out from underneath it, settling, finally, onto his ears. Akira looks away, letting him have his privacy, and is caught off-guard when the blond speaks again.

"W-whatever, let's just get inside." Is half-muddled under Sakamoto's hand, but when he kicks off the wall and steps further into the alley, Akira gets the message and follows.

Untouchable. The pronunciation of the neon green letters is probably butchering the name of the shop, but he doubts it matters as he's stepping inside the shop's door when Sakamoto holds it open in front of him. All at once, everything catches his eye, effectively blinding him to both the big picture and the details of the new environment. He recognizes the bell on the door as it rings, a soft chime in an otherwise near-silent room. The air hums with air conditioning that doesn't help the stuffy warm air as it starts drying out his nose. The interior of the shop is more organized than the
mess of bikes and dumpsters outside would have indicated and Akira finds himself curious, even as he keeps his head down and follows Sakamoto further into the shop. As organized as it was, with neat boxes stacked on top of one another, it did little to conceal the vast amount of things crammed into the building. He has a hard time taking it all in, the displays of military-grade equipment and dangerous looking weapons.

At the edge of the shop and circling around it, are glass display cases-though, they too have numerous boxes piled onto them- housing various weapons side by side and he figures it's a good place to start, if any. Sakamoto is nearby, too, having not strayed too far into the place and out of sight. Akira steps further into the stuffy air of Untouchables and stands in front of the display case nearest the exit. The window riding the wall above it is barred with black metal, sending pleats and bars into the cases and sending back a glare.

"Help ya find somethin, glasses?" The address startles him with its suddenness more than anything else; and after he recoils from jumping, it takes him a while to find the origin of the voice.

Behind the counter, mostly sunken into a low-hanging chair with his boots propped onto the counter. Half his face is cast in shadow from the hat pulled low on his head, the bright orange ear-protectors wrapped around the bucket of the hat make him double take. The man underneath the hat has his eyes narrowed into almost cat-like slits, his mouth is as sunken as the man himself is, riding low on his chin in a scowl with a white stick hanging out of one corner.

After another moment of silence, the man sits up straight, looking more like a person the less slouched he becomes and Akira becomes cognizant of the fact that he's been asked a question.

He shakes his head, at the same time Sakamato speaks up, "We're lookin' to buy somethin'."

"'S'at so?" The man grins under the shadow of his cap; Akira's not sure if it's a friendly gesture or not and takes a step back from the counter, "You a coupla enthusiasts? I've never seen either of you around here before."

Akira shrugs when the man's gaze falls on him and he catches Sakamoto frowning out of the corner of his eye when the man looks in his direction.

"Right then," The guy says without provocation, sitting up even straighter in his seat and pulling on the end of the stick in his mouth, "Don't go pointin' these things around at people. Keep 'em in your bag or something' if you're out in public. And don't let the fuzz catch wind of you havin' 'em, I don't need anyone sniffin' around here. If you do break one of those rules, I dunno you; you don't me, got it?"

He bobs his head dutifully when the man behind the counter points the stick at him, a piece of bright red candy hanging off the tip. The mention of the police just enough to make his gut curl uncomfortably in on itself.

Beside him, Sakamoto does the same and the man settles back down, sinking low in his seat with a smirk.

"I don't mind helpin' some fresh faces but uh..." The man rolls his neck around and itches at his neck, revealing a tattoo of a reptile for a brief enough period that he can identify its shape before it disappears again in the fold of the man's jacket, "Stick to the kiddie shelf, 'kay?" The man gestures with a sweep of the cherry red curve of the candy in his hand to the shelf his feet had just been on. "Top shelf only, got it?"

Akira nods into a bow before taking a step forward to examine the shelf the clerk had pointed out.
On his left, Sakamoto huddles in as well, taking in the selection.

Just below his shoulder, Morgana offers, "The more real they look, the more effective they should be in the MetaVerse."

"Uh," The clerk pipes up, "Was that a cat?"

Akira can feel his heart sink into the soles of his school-issued shoes and averts his gaze away from the counter and the clerk in general.

Morgana disappears into the folds of his bag and Sakamoto reels back, standing disturbingly straight as he steps away from the display case. "Uh- N-nope, no cats here."

The man behind the counter scoffs, but doesn't comment further.

Akira- none too gently- shoves Morgana's head back into the bag when the cat tries to slip out again.

They all look pretty real... He notes mildly, letting his eye wander over the shelf the clerk had pointed out and beyond; but upon seeing the price tag attached to the merchandise just a shelf below, Akira keeps his gaze locked onto their permitted shelf and hoping that looking didn't cost extra.

"What about that one?" Ryuji questions, jabbing his finger towards the middle of the case. A large handful-most likely two, considering it has more than one handle- of a machine sits under it, covered in ridges of black, shiny plastic. The barrel of it is wide and Akira has a tough time imagining just a single bullet flying through the cavernous space. "Pretty badass, huh?"

Akira shrugs. It looked real enough.

"Psst." Morgana whispers, "What about me?"

Sakamoto looks at his bag with a frown, "Whaddya mean? You don't even have fingers, you dumb-"

"The word cat is replaced with a growl as Ryuji cuts himself off with a quick glance to the clerk.

"What about that?" Morgana removes a paw to point towards the corner of the display case where a stack of slingshots are piled up together, "I don't need fingers for that!"

Sakamoto whispers sharply, "Fine, fine. Just stop talking." Then turns to face him towards him, "Whaddya think Ann would like, somethin' like what you got?"

Again, Akira shrugs. It hadn't crossed his mind before; and even when he thought about it, his mind drew a blank.

"You're not really helpful, are you?" Sakamato growls again, now directed at him.

Sakamoto stares at the display case for another few minutes before finally drawing the clerks attention, "Yo- Uh, I mean, excuse me?"

The man behind the counter sniffs quietly, turns a page in his magazine only to close it in the same instant. "Yeah?" He asks, sitting up again.

A phone goes off and Akira tracks the noise to Sakamoto then to the blond's hand as he digs it out of his pocket. "It's my ma, can you finish and I'll meet you outside?" He asks, but is out of the door before Akira can even begin to offer an answer.
He ends up pointing to the big monstrosity that Ryuji had pointed out, the slingshot, and another odd looking one that was bigger than both of them for Takamaki.

The clerk boxes each of the items and stacks them on the counter between them, "That'll be uh, four-thousand."

He can't help the shocked, raspy gasp that plunges from his throat.

Akira almost reaches for his own wallet, mostly empty and tucked into the back pocket of his uniform, then decides against it. Instead, he shoves his hand past Morgana's frame and latches onto the wallet from the MetaVerse, handing over the contents of that wallet instead. The guy flicks through the bills and slaps them onto the counter.

"Wanna bag?" His nose twitches as he offers, and wrinkles when Akira nods a moment later.

"Not much of a talker, are ya?" The guy asks, "Unlike your friend out there." He raises the cherry-red end of his candy, gesturing just beyond the glass door where Sakamoto is, still talking on the phone. His back is turned to both of them; unaware that he's being talked about.

He shrugs.

The clerk chuckles, "Needs to be more guys like you out there."

Akira's fusses with a piece of his hair, resolutely ignoring the way his cheeks start to burn, the bruise on his cheek starts to pulse in time with his heart.

The guns are bagged up in an unmarked, white plastic bag, then scoots towards him.

"Thank you." Ends up spilling out of his hands before he can help it, his brain skipping a step before he's realized it; he blames the embarrassment.

Opposite to him, the clerk's expression recalibrates through several unreadable expression before settling on a dimpled quirk of his lips; a smile that's mostly hidden under ashen facial hair.

"See you. Later." The guy signs back, leaving Akira floored until the guy pushes the bags forward again with his foot after he sinks back into his seat. He hoists it on the opposite shoulder to Morgana, surprised how much they weigh; though to say he wasn't more surprised at what had just happened was an understatement.

The door's bell is enough to draw Ryuji's attention from his phone call. The blond turns around, looks at the bag hanging off of his shoulder and gives him a thumbs-up.

Akira walks off, giving his teammate a respectable distance while he stares off into the still impressive traffic of central street from afar.

"Inmate!" A harsh voice rings, startling him but doing nothing to halt the still flowing traffic in front of him. Turning on his heel, he comes face to face with a large, familiar door. It's bars float straight up, standing taller and wider than he does. And, not dissimilar to the girl standing just outside of it, is completely shrouded in a deep, velvet glow.

Caroline stares up at him with palpable viciousness that has him taking a step back. "Our master made this door so you'd have a method of contacting us while you're awake, so you better use it, and you better be grateful." She barks with a slash of the metal baton that her fingers are curled around. Her attention shifts away from him, "Oh, is that one of your contracts?" Her one eye glows a deep, uncomfortable red, "Ah, The Chariot, right?"
Akira's brow furrows together as he glances over his shoulder, towards where Ryuji is standing, still on the phone. *Chariot?*

Caroline's eye fades back into it's normal-though still abnormal- color. "Huh." She says, taking a step back, her back leaning against the door she'd, presumably, came from. "W-well, make sure to foster your bond with him, I gotta go, inmate."

The door slams on thin air as Caroline steps into, yet he can't see her through the door's open bars. He recognizes the door for what it is then; the same one he always views his wardens through. Only now it's in the real world. He takes another step away from it. Even when he turns his back to it, he can feel its presence lingering over him; the pull of the MetaVerse seems to tug at his very being. Separating himself from it is like walking through water and the first few steps are the hardest. Only when he reaches the edge of the alleyway that Sakamoto had dragged him through does the encompassing pressure seem to ebb away. Even still, the empty void beyond that prison bars seem to tug at edges of his clothes.

"Sorry 'bout that." Ryuji's suddenness draws him out of himself, severing the connection between him and the velvet room by appearing at his side, "The school keeps callin' my ma and her only break is around lunch..." The blond trails off, then starts up again drawing up a smile that, even to Akira, looks a little off. "So what did you end up gettin'?"

Handing over the bag, he lets Sakamoto dig through it. "Oh you got everyone somethin' huh?"

His face alters again, then he laughs, "Thanks dude! How much do do I owe ya?"

Akira shakes his head when Ryuji looks down at him; the empty wallet in his bag seems heavier without most of its contents, the only thing remaining is the blank business card, and he considers throwing the whole thing away.

"You sure?" He shakes his head again, then adjusts his glasses when they start slipping down.

Ryuji exhales from his mouth, "You wanna grab somethin' to eat before you split?"

He shrugs; still full from lunch, he decides to follow Sakamoto into Big Bang Burger anyway, but doesn't order anything, not even when the other boy offers to buy him something.

"Uh," Ryuji ends up saying after wolfing down a burger and most of his fries. One is still dangling from the edge of his lip as he continues speaking, a vague impression of the clerk from Untouchables. "Money's been pretty tight lately, at home I mean. And uh, Kobayakowa, the principal, he's been callin' me to his office after school so we don't like, sue or whatever. He's even offered me my scholarship back to butter my mom up, ya know?"

A grimace shakes some salt from the fry hanging from his lip. Akira thinks he looks more angry than happy at the news.

"It should be a good thing, you know?" Ryuji looks up from the mess of salt and starch on the tray between them. He's not slouching, but seems smaller than normal; subdued in a way he hasn't seen since before either of their awakenings.

Akira nods quietly.

"My ma, she's still thinkin' about lawyering up, though. Kobayakowa's breathin' down my neck to make me stop her but..." Ryuji waves a hand, sending a splash of salt onto the table, "I dunno."

Thinking about lawyers makes him jittery, an uncomfortable shuddering in his shoulders that he
can't control. When he looks up, Sakamoto's face is like staring into a blank wall; no smile, no frown or grimace. The fry hanging from his lip is gone as well.

"I made it awkward, didn't I?" Ryuji asks, breaking the silence between them with a quiet laugh. "My bad..."

"What would you do?" He ends up asking, handing his phone over.

Ryuji looks at it, then at him, but doesn't respond. Akira occupies himself with Mishima's website.

"I dunno." Ryuji eventually replies, standing up with his tray and returning a minute later. "I guess I'd do the same thing, but..."

Across from him, Ryuji folds himself over the empty table. His hands wrap around his head to scratch at his scalp roughly. Akira can hear the blond's frustration in the huffs of breath he lets out under the table. Had he said the wrong thing? Eventually though, Sakamoto sits back up, then slouches further into his seat, arms crossed tightly.

"Whatever." He says, leaving Akira even more unsure.

They leave shortly after that, Sakamoto leading the three of them back to the station. Akira has to jog to keep up with the taller boy's pace, keeping his schoolbag tucked closer to his chest to prevent Morgana from bouncing too much. When they enter the station, Sakamoto turns on his heel so suddenly that Akira nearly runs into him.

"Thanks for uh... today." He says, tucking his hands into the pockets of his school uniform, "Could you not mention what we talked about to Ann- about Kobayakowa, I mean?"

Akira nods, bobbing his head forward.

"Maybe if I just lay low, he'll just leave me alone." Sakamoto laughs, "Speakin' of that, shouldn't we wait to pawn off that medal we got from Kamoshida? I mean if anybody asks where we got it... Well, I don't even want to think about that, ya know?"

Akira nods a bit, they'd need to find a place that wouldn't ask questions about a few high-schoolers with a weirdly glowing medal.

"Hopefully this thing with Kamoshida dies down soon," Sakamoto sighs, "People keep lookin' at me like I'm gonna snap any second; but on the bright side, my home-room gave me some bonus points on a quiz for 'improving'." He admits with finger quotes and a roll of his eyes.

He smiles a bit at that, wondering if he'd receive the same treatment.

"Anyway, I better get goin'," Sakamoto waves, "See ya tomorrow?"

Akira waves back, heading through one gate while Sakamoto meanders into another.

Sakura-san doesn't stop him as he walks through the cafe, but upon hearing a familiar name, Akira stops in his tracks; his feet cement themselves to the floor as Kamoshida's name seems to ring in his ears. When he glances up, towards the mounted television, he immediately identifies the Shujin uniform; an exact reflection of the clothes wrapped around his own body. The camera is cut down to just below the neck, rendering whomever speaking in privacy. An unnatural, robotic voice filters through the speakers.

"...bruises all the time. It was scary, but I'm relieved that the abuse is finally going to end now."
His heart starts beating painfully in his chest, making him far too aware of how quickly it was starting to palpitate. Swallowing around the growing lump in his throat, Akira watches raptly as the camera cuts away from the faceless boy and onto what was obviously a female student.

"I'm glad I don't have to deal with that sexual harassment anymore..." The robotic overlay on her voice stopped abruptly, emitting a robotic, static-laden screech that takes him a moment to identify as a sob. "He'd call me into his office during class or... or- or after practice and-

The camera cuts away again, censoring whatever the girl was going to say.

*If I was a girl...* The thought washes over him, filling him with dread.

"Isn't that your school?" Sakura-san asks, pulling his stare away from the screen. His guardian is standing behind an open flame of a coffee burner, but the gaze behind his glasses is fixed on him.

A mixture of shame and pride renders him still for a long moment, the entirety of which is under Sakura-san stern gaze; knowing he'd had a hand in helping stop Kamoshida, but also at the prospect at being caught and put into a cell. Eventually, though, he forces himself to nod, hoping his guardian doesn't look too far into the action. Sakura-san's expression shifts into blank mask and his stomach drops in his chest.

"Things might get... turbulent, but it's important to keep your head down and your hands clean, got it?"

He nods, and without waiting for permission, Akira takes Morgana upstairs and remains there until the cafe empties, only helping himself to the bathroom when Sakura-san finally leaves. He tucks the gun boxes under his bed, concealing them further with the box that Takemi had left him in addition to the bottles that she'd already given him the first time she'd ambushed him in the bath house. Curious though, he retracts his arm from under the bed, taking one of the products with him to examine in the light. Sure enough, when he examined one of them- a cream that was supposed to reduce his scars- her name was labeled in one corner in bold, gothic looking letters.

Curious still, he opens the product, screwing off the cap until it clatters on the floor and ripping off the metallic protective shield with it. The cream is as thick as lotion, but burns like an open flame when he sticks his fingers in it. Lifting up the front hem of his shirt, Akira rubs where he knows the scars on his ribs start and hisses into attic's empty space. The mintiness attempting to cover up the medicinal scent the product gives off burns his nose until its as numb.

Turning off the overhead light, Akira settles into bed and Morgana moves to the corner with a complaint about the scent. Out like a light, he hadn't heard anything the other had said.

It takes just over two weeks after the news broadcast for Kamoshida to not be featured in every conversation. The Olympian-medalist, and the Phantom Thieves with him, fade into the whisper of whispers during school hours and the name almost never makes an appearance outside of Shujin's grounds. He's surprised, really, at how quickly things died down after the man's confession. If something similar had happened had happened at home, he's certain it would still be circulating around the library or around town; in Tokyo, however, nobody looks at him differently in the train station when he has his school uniform on, no reporters hanging outside of the stone walls that block Shujin Academy from the outside world. If Kamoshida's trail ends up on the news, he doesn't hear anything about it and, in those two weeks, he doesn't go looking for answers.

He does, however, take Sakamato's advice, and waits for things to die down before asking Morgana to retrieve the medal from wherever he's hidden it. During the first day of their school break- one Akira hadn't even known they had until the day before it started- and also the start of
Golden Week, he walks down the road from LeBlanc, to the strange repair shop that Sakura-san had sent him to. He's disappointed, but not all that surprised, when the man refuses to buy the thing off of him; it does leave him at a bit of a loss, however, and he's not sure where to go next until Morgana ends up suggesting they head to Untouchable with the notion that the clerk seemed more attuned to the sort of hushed, shady business they were after.

"Back again, glasses?" The clerk asks as soon as he steps inside, startling him. A grin, one Akira can only describe as wolfish, spreads around the candy sticking, seemingly perpetually, from the man's mouth.

Akira shrugs, attempting to appear casual, and approaches the counter, tugging the medal from Morgana's underbelly.

"Buy this?" He questions, pushing his phone over with one hand and dangling the golden medal from the other.

The clerk's eyes bulge out for a second, then narrow into an unsettling glare that wither all of his attempts at casualness.

"Someone send you, boy?" His voice is hard, like a physical, cold presence that sends a shudder racking down his spine.

Frightened, Akira shakes his head quickly once he manages to grasp at most of the control over his body.

Send him?

"I'm havin' a hard time believin' that, glasses." The guy mutters, scrubbing at the salt and pepper facial hair on his chin with a hand. The glare slides off of him as the clerk examines his other wrist where a dark-colored watch is wrapped around his wrist, then, just as quickly, slides up to him; locking him place. He feels like a specimen under the dark look, even when the man stretches back with a sigh, tugging at the pair of earring sticking out of one ear and, in the process, exposing the dark reptile tattooed on his neck.

"Listen, kid." He ends up saying, when Akira builds up the wit to start tucking the medal back into his bag. Checking his watch again, the man smirks at him from behind the counter, "On uh, second thought, I'll snag that medal from ya. How's thirty sound?"

His hand pauses.

Was thirty too low? He feels stupid for not looking up gold prices before trying to pawn the thing off, and chances a glance down at Morgana, who's no longer bothering to be clandestine as he sticks his head out of the bag.

He ends up nodding, half-desperate to just be rid of the thing. We could always go to Mementos if we need more money, he rationalizes, thinking of the wallet he'd dumped just outside of this very shop.

Thirty ends up meaning thirty thousand, and Akira can't help it when his eyes go wide at the sight; he's not sure he's ever seen, let alone been handed, that much money before. He glances up at the guy, almost certain that the utter disbelief he's experiencing is somehow showing on his face. He has a feeling that the happiness is mostly genuine when the clerk just offers him a small, dry laugh as he slides the bills over the counter, snatching the medal from around his wrist with the same hand in a quick, fluid motion. He has a feeling that the happiness is mostly genuine.

"And uh," The guy says, reaching a hand under the bar and throwing a brown paper bag onto the
glass counter between them with the same swiftness he'd used to take the medal. It clangs noisily on the glass, making him jump. "Take this as a... token of my appreciation. Bring it by sometime next week, now scram." The door to the shop opens as the clerk gets through most of his statement. Akira watches his eyes get a bit wide and, for some reason, takes the bag in hand, tucking it between Morgana and the dry-erase board. His own fear intermingles with Arsene's curiosity; and he wonders, not for the first time, when their emotions had began to muddle into one another.

"Thanks for your business." The clerk says loudly, smiling brightly in a way reminiscent to Sakamoto. The change in volume startles him, forcing him to wonder when they'd devolved into whispers before he gets his feet to operate. He scurries out of the door, dodging around two guys in suits as they approach the counter he'd just abandoned; the badges on their chests as he scoots by do not go unnoticed and he can't help the bone-deep dread that sinks into his stomach as he weasels into the alleyway.

"W-were those cops?" Morgana questions once they're at the junction between the, mostly new, entrance to the Velvet Room and the entrance to the alley. Ignoring him, Akira rips the paper bag out from beside Morgana and rips it open. The force at which he does makes either side of the flimsy paper tear a few centimeters downwards, creating fissures in the creased packaging.

A gasp pushes out of his throat, raspy and shaky, as he peers inside.

A gun- an actual gun! Morgana climbs out from the bag, somehow managing to balance on his arms and tightrope across; his limbs are locked in shock, but somehow able to maintain Morgana's weight without the cat tipping over even when the burn starts to settle in.

"Is that a gun- wait, wait... I think it's fake!" Morgana exclaims, pushing his nose into the bag that has a gun in it. "It looks so real..."

Morgana's face pulls away, then stares straight up at him, a smile tugs at his lips, baring his sharp, feline teeth. "D-do you think he'd noticed if we used it?"

Akira isn't sure of the answer, nor is he anymore sure when he ends up tucking it even under the bed, past the boxes of unused medicine, even past the empty boxes of their previous gun purchases until it's practically against the attic's wall; completely hidden by the light that Akira can't make out his own hand until it's retracted. Fake as it might be, it looks real, really real. Sakura-san would throw him out the window it's currently hiding under if he ever discovered it real.

Once the gun is out of sight though, his heart slows down, still pounding heavily and painfully against his chest, but slowing nonetheless. He feels faint enough that he ends up taking a nap without noticing, the folded up bills- thirty thousand Yen- still clenched in his hand.

He informs his teammates about the money- thirty thousand Yen- but doesn't mention, even in passing, about the gun the clerk had all but thrust in his hands. Takamaki sends back an address and a date- the last day of their break- then logs off after sending a smiling, cartoon face.

Akira smiles a bit, indulgent. Thirty thousand Yen!

Chapter End Notes

Leave a review.
Chapter title is thanks to Coach Mig
What's your favourite food?
Chapter 18

He decides not to leave the cafe for the rest of the day, at least until Sakura-san leaves for the evening. Yet, even when that time rolls around, anxiety cements him in the doorway of the cafe and forcing him to double check that the gun was still hidden. He checks the glass panes that separate Leblanc from the rest of Yongen-Jaya more times than he can count; each time, he gazes through, half expecting to see Sakura-san on the other side with an army of officers in tow.

It's after midnight when he finally takes a step out of the cafe and finds himself in the bathhouse across the street, scrubbing stress sweat out of his skin, thankful that he'll have the rest of the week to catch up the rest he's depriving himself of to keep watch.

He checks under the bed when he returns, still dripping wet onto the floor as he peers underneath the mattress. Without much light reaching it from behind boxes of supplies, Akira can barely make out the shape of the folded up bag he'd gotten from Untouchable, but it still crinkles under his hand when he grips the gun's handle through it.

*Still there...* He notes once more, relieved. Allowing his fingers to slip away from the gun and his arm from underneath the perpetually dusty mattress, Akira climbs onto the bed, ever cognizant of the burning presence lingering just beneath the sheets.

When he's about to fade from consciousness, he feels Morgana finally climb onto the bed with him, dipping the mattress underneath him until he finally plummets between both of his legs.

When he wakes up, Morgana is on top of him, one set of claws digging into shoulder and the other set of paws curled between his chest and arm.

Akira's first waking thought is that Morgana was far too heavy, his second was a burning hot feeling that stabbed through him; his desire to check under the bed, just one more time. He decides, however, to wait until his roommate is awake- and off of him- before doing that.

Morgana doesn't budge for another hour, of which he spends most of doing his best to ignore the pain that is finally registering. The cat doesn't apologize when he finally removes himself from the bed and Akira doesn't bring it up either. Instead, he slides himself off of the mattress, jetting up a layer of dust from the floorboards as he does so. When his hand slides under the bed once more, gripping onto the more familiar sturdiness of the gun, Akira releases a sigh; with it goes an ache in his chest that he hadn't been aware of.

He pulls his hand away, then allows himself to get ready for the day. Somehow, though, before he's consciously realized it, he's already settled back into the attic, keeping guard on the bed, no shoes, no phone. Even his glasses are still tucked away on the shelf beside his bed.

He wouldn't be leaving LeBlanc today either.

"Joker," Morgana says, climbing onto the bed after he does, "I think we should go to Mementos today; I want to examine those doors more closely and there has to be something that causes them to open."
Akira doesn't move to get off of the bed, but he does reach over and pull his phone from its charger. Swiping away notifications, he pulls open a blank page and begins typing, only to erase the entire thing and start again.

"I don't feel like leaving today. Sorry." He offers the most truth he's able to; he'd like nothing more to get out of Yongen-Jaya and return the gun to clerk at Untouchable. He just can't seem to work up the nerve, though. His courage will come to him eventually, when the nerves die down, just like the rumbling of Kamoshida did.

Morgana pouts, raising and lowering different parts of his lips. Dark, oceanic eyes stare at him while he sits there, nearly mollified by a cat.

A cat that's human. He corrects, sneaking a glance only to find Morgana still staring, unblinking.

His teammate eventually gives up, retreating to the couch on the far side of the room and staring at nothing in particular. When he climbs out of bed, grabbing his glasses on the way, Morgana has no reaction; and when he climbs back onto his guard post with his schoolbag and the journal that Sakura-san had given him, Morgana remains subdued to the dusty leather of the sofa.

Given that he doesn't have much to do outside of school and their altercations in the MetaVerse, there isn't much from his notes that he has to go over and the homework they'd be assigned for the break is completed in a short number of hours, leaving him with not much to do besides stare at the blank journal.

An entire month, Akira recognizes idly, flicking through the leather-bound journal's pages even though he knows them all to be blank. He finds it almost ironic, that someone like him would find nothing to write about. The MetaVerse itself could fill up multiple novels, his strange interactions since moving could fill some more, the nightmares and feelings of dread that constantly threaten to swallow him up. Even the number of odd smells he's experienced in Tokyo could fill a pamphlet or two.

He considers, however briefly, about writing about the Phantom Thieves, but knows if the journal—much like the gun he's guarding—were to ever be found, his probation would most likely lead to jail time.

Akira decides to write about Shujin Academy instead, completely ignoring its MetaVerse counterpart. He's stumped a moment later, only managing to write down the names of his teachers and what class he's in. None of his classmates will talk to him, the teachers glare at him; the principal himself banned his best method of communication.

Am I the only one? He's not deaf, but surely there had to be someone that needed sign as much as he did at their school. He doesn't write about Kobayakowa or the embarrassment he feels whenever he has to drag the dry-erase board from his desk to present his answers.

He debates on writing about Sakamoto or Takamaki. He could just cross out anything that would be incriminating, but their Phantom Thief selves and their real selves were, undoubtedly, connected. Most likely, if it hadn't been for Kamoshida's palace, Sakamoto would have never had a reason to speak to him again; would find it too troublesome to constantly read whatever he had to say. Takamaki was the same as well, though they shared a class for most of the day.

Is it weird that's she's the only one? Nobody else in his class looked at him, though they did still talk about him, yet Takamaki was constantly texting and talking to him.

Mishima, too. He figures, though the other boy only spoke to him once, and only about his
connection to the Phantom Thieves.

He wonders if it would be suspicious if he just wrote nothing about his teammates, except for Kaito, who he happened to find on his way home from the station one day. Just an ordinary cat who liked to meow.

Akira writes about Takamaki first. She sits in front of him for most of the day, is taller than him; she's nice to him. He doesn't mention how her screams are still fresh in his memory, one of turmoil and one of rage; doesn't mention Kamoshida's apology to hear, how he faded from existence after she seared him into an ashy facsimile of a king.

Writing about Sakamoto is more conflicting, he's unsure what to say about the blond that wouldn't set off any alarms that Sakura-san might have. Eventually, he brings up his first day of school, running into the other boy and their run in with the police; something that Sakura-san already knows about. He makes a note of how nice the other boy is to him as well and mentioning nothing about his status as a delinquent or the vulgar language he tends to use.

The picture he's making is almost idyllic and he wonders- fears- that anyone who were to read this journal would see right through his half-truths. The Kurusu Akira on the pages aren't him, not really, yet he continues to write about the man as if he knew him. A normal teenager who has friends, who went to Big Bang Burger for the first time almost a month ago; his disability isn't mentioned once, nor his probation, or the strange adults that seem to put him in the most compromising positions. Instead, he's a youth that goes to Shujin Academy, one ignorant of the truth.

The Akira transcribed in ink wasn't the truth. But, even if he felt guilty for lying, he still jots down tidbits of his life, his hand unconstrained by the anxiousness that's threatening the flatten his heart.

Home jumps into his head before he can stop it, of writing in a journal similar to this one.

An entire month had passed since he'd started his probation, yet nothing had come from his parents.

Would they write? He questions, closing the journal and sliding it onto the windowsill.

A part of him feared that they wouldn't.

What would we even talk about? It's only been a month since he's moved to Tokyo, yet home seemed like a lifetime ago.

When Akira finally manages to pull out of distant memories, the attic is stained in rusty orange. The sun, somehow, managing to peak through the numerous buildings blocking the horizon and cast its fading glow into Yongen. The air around him still thrummed with activity and barely travelling murmurs, the permeating aroma of Sakura-san's curry and coffee were still pungent from where he was. Each intake of breath was like a punch to the stomach, making it growl louder and louder until the noise was no more disregardable than the pain pulsing from his mid-section.

He was hungry again, a side-effect of his expanding stomach; Tokyo was spoiling him.

When the whispers and smells from downstairs finally died out, so did his distractions from his boredom. Moments later, though, the stairs creaked noisily, announcing Sakura-san's presence.

Akira resisted the urge to bolt over the side of the bed and check the gun once again, but he did sit straight up in the middle of the bed, letting his calves fall over the sides along with half the blanket to, hopefully, cover any questionable items he'd concealed under there.
"You stay up here all day?" Sakura-san eventually asked, casting shadows over him and Morgana.

Akira nodded, swallowing around silent confessions and staring at the ground between them. He found himself, not for the first time, unable to look towards his guardian's face in fear that his guilt might show. When he lifted a hand to push up his glasses, but finding only empty space where the lenses would be, he let his fingers tug on strands of his own hair, twisting them out of his face.

"Why?" His guardian questions, crossing his arms over his apron and blocking out the lower half of Leblanc's name.

His fingers, in tandem with his heart, cease all motion for a long, eternal second, before resuming. His heart continues to pound noisily at his heaving rib cage, his fingers fall from his hair, gesturing to the notebooks scattered over the mattress. His palm finally lands on the journal that Sakura-san had given him and he considers handing it over, but decides to wait until the man asks for it or changes the subject. Instead of the journal, though, Sakura-san plucks up one of the identical notebooks on the bed and flips it open.

Sakura-san's gaze flicks over his notes, yet Akira can still feel the man's disapproving stare as if the man's gaze was locked onto him through the pages.

"Studying?" His caretaker asks, clapping the notebook shut with one hand. Akira flinches. "During break?"

He nods, in turn, to both questions.

Sakura-san's face flows through different expressions, each equally unreadable. Eventually, the older man sighs, then returns the notebook to the small pile on the bed.

"Your food is downstairs," He says, back turned and departing, "Don't burn the place down."

Akira nods to an absent figure. His stomach growls at the prospect of a meal, but he doesn't attempt to stand until he hears the cafe's door slam shut. Even then, it's only to finally check under the bed. Akira peers into the darkness, crawling under the bed completely this time and resting one hand over the paper bag at the back. The other is used as a pillow, folded up along with his knees until he's entirely submerged in the mattress' shadow.

It's quiet under the bed, the dark, borderline claustrophobic atmosphere reminds him of home. He doesn't smell curry or coffee, his stomach doesn't growl after hours of being empty. His head doesn't throb with boredom. His hand isn't concealing a realistic looking model gun.

He's merely Akira.

When he jerks out of the calm, he inhales a cloud of dust and chokes on it. He does his best to hack up the debris without outright spitting it on the floor and he's able to pull himself out from under the bed with his lungs intact. The gun is still here, hidden behind boxes and strange medicine. The attic is much louder when he's not surrounded on all sides, yet deafeningly quiet. He can't feel another's presence, aside from Morgana's and the personas quietly stewing inside of him.

Gross... He thinks moments later, pulling his hand away from his hair only to find that that too is covered in a thick layer of dust.

Akira bathes with purpose, once again not risking using the hot springs and double checking that the bathing area was doctor free before pulling his clothes off.

When he returns to Leblanc, smelling of tea leaves, the first thing he does is stick his head under
the bed once more, checking the gun for the last time that evening before climbing onto the bed.

There's a long silence, then he wakes up to the sounds of birds and coffee makers. For once, he can hear the television downstairs, expanding on recent events and the weather. Nothing he finds particularly interesting, not enough to have woken him up.

Morgana is back on the bed. It's something that he notices only when he sits up. The black and white cat is on the edge of the bed, as far away as possible while still remaining on the attic's mattress.

When Morgana awakens, or notices that he's awake, he says nothing to him. Instead, the feline patrols the attic at a slow, rhythmic pace.

He must be bored... Akira realizes sometime in the afternoon, watching Morgana strut around when he's supposed to be reviewing his notes over quadratic formulas. The cat still refuses to look up at him and Akira feels guilty for the quarantine he's put the two of them under, too aware of Morgana's mission in Mementos. Unable to cave in, he finds it difficult to apologize or offer an explanation to his teammate- especially when Morgana won't even glance towards him.

When the cafe closes that night, he offers to take Morgana around Yongen before he heads into the bathhouse. Getting the cat to look at him, or at the phone in his hand more specifically, is more challenging than the actual act of walking around the near-rural district.

Akira's feet tremble in his boots, which snakes up his calves and liquefies control of his knees. He jogs unsteadily behind Morgana just to keep up, his entire body threatening to crumble under him as spring air hisses through trashed alleyways. Morgana slips through the alleyways of Yongen-Jaya with ease, hopping over tipped over trash bins and, somehow, avoiding the murky puddles that lurk on the other side of each of them.

Akira isn't as lucky or graceful, he steps into each puddle they pass, cringing as the opaque puddles make his steps sticky and loud, the noise amplified with the dead silence of the area around them.

Morgana abandons him and Akira can only run around a few corners before he finally stumbles, barreling into an empty street as his feet stumble under him. He feels the pain in his wrists first, where he tried to soften the impact to his head; then it erupts in his knees where mud and dirt are caked on his jeans.

When he stands up, he glances into the dark around him, trying to use the moonlight to spot Morgana's oceanic gaze in the night, only for there to be nothing. Dragging himself to his feet, Akira hisses, reaching down on reflex to grasp at his burning leg. He considers going after Morgana, but when his next step finally crumbles under him, then the next, he decides to head to the bathhouse instead, hoping that Morgana wouldn't run into any danger.

The cat was waiting on Leblanc's step when Akira emerged from the opposite alleyway. The cat was back to avoiding him, not saying a word as Akira unlocks the cafe and steps inside. When he wakes up the next morning, Morgana is back on the bed, curled in the corner and far away from him.

He's not sure what any of it means.

When Children's day finally arrives, there's a long stretch of flesh that's only beginning to scab over that drops down from his knee and ends halfway to his ankle. It burns when he stands up from bed, even more so when he crouches to reach under the bed. When his hand wraps around the model gun and uncoils from it, he doesn't pull himself fully out from under the mattress. Instead, he grabs
at the still full box of medicine along with the other loose containers he'd somehow accumulated.

He unscrews the lid on a jar of multivitamins first, figuring that would be the easiest place to start. Each of the tablets in the bottle are all identical; small, cylindrical, and white. When he swallows two of them, his mouth is overwhelmed with the taste of peaches.

The next bottle is the already opened jar of cream that's supposed to reduce his already present scars. Akira applies the minty mixture around the curves of his ribs, but avoids brushing any of it around his leg, not sure how much it would help the still present injury but more than certain that it would burn more than the cream does already.

Sifting through the box that Sakura-san had left, he finds something that might work. Anti-septic cream with pain relief. He doesn't recognize any of the ingredients that are listed under Takemi's name. After a moment of hesitation, he ends up rubbing the cream into and around the injury.

The hiss is rend from his mouth before he can clamp it down. The noise surprises him enough that he recoils from it, jerking back against the edge of the bed he's leaning on. Across from him, Morgana looks in his direction for the first time that morning. Akira thinks he can see one of Morgana's eyebrows lift under the dark folds of fur, but he can't confirm it before Morgana is facing the other way, looking down the stairwell of the cafe; for a moment, Akira wondered if he hallucinated the entire thing.

After using the cafe's bathroom to get dressed, Akira finally checks his phone. There's a surprising number of notifications. All of them are from Ryuji and Ann, some personal messages, but most of them were concentrated in the group chat. A lot of the messages are the same, asking if he's going to show up, about his health, if he's sold the medal.

Glancing over at his pillow, where he tucked away the bills, Akira smiles to himself as he confirms.

The replies are almost instantaneous; Takamaki sending the address they're to meet at once again, along with a picture and Ryuji reacting to it.

Something about the picture makes him uncomfortable.

Fancy... He comments to himself, feeling under dressed just look at the building.

Are we really going here?

Inside of him, Arsene curls his presence around his own, making him feel warmer and that much more uncomfortable. Without words- or thoughts- he can tell that his persona is pleased.

Akira ends up digging through his box of clothes once more, looking for something more presentable than t-shirts and jeans, but doesn't find anything that quells the uncomfortable lurch under his skin. Tugging on a hoodie and pulling the straps of his schoolbag over his shoulder makes him feel more comfortable, though, and he hopes that feeling will last through this afternoon.

All of that comfort sinks into his shoes when he approaches the stairway and meets eyes with Morgana. His first instinct is to look away, and he uses that moment of panic to pull out his phone.

"I'm sorry." He says, finally; which he is, he's just not sure what for.

Morgana looks at the screen, then up at him. Akira can feel the cat's gaze like a physical presence, much like Arsene's. He doesn't say anything, not even as he climbs into the bag hanging from
Akira's shoulder. He's not sure if it's an acceptance or not, but he decides to take it as it comes, carrying the two of them in the cafe and towards the door.

A loud bang pulls him away from his thoughts, making him jump. Under his arm, he can feel Morgana do the same. Akira turns around, releasing his hold on the cafe's door and spotting Sakura-san staring at him from the other end of the cafe. There's a plate of curry on the bar in front of him, most likely the cause of the sudden noise.

"You headed out?" Sakura-san questions gruffly, setting down a glass of water on one side of the plate and a spoon on the other.

Akira nods towards the floor, wondering if he should have asked permission first.

Sakura-san makes a noise, "Better eat, then, today is gonna be busy here today and I can't afford to close the cafe because you can't take care of yourself."

Akira approaches the bar, sitting down at his spot and avoiding clashing gazes with his guardian as he nods once more. Internally, the words make him recoil. Red, hot shame starts bubbling in stomach when he hears those words; a near-identical statement to the one Takemi had made the last time she'd seen him.

He realizes, stupidly, that he had only come down from the attic to use the bathroom and bathe. Not once had he entered the cafe's kitchen to eat something, something that Sakura-san must have most definitely noticed. He considers up making the argument that he was on the way to get food, but can't bring himself to reach for his phone while Sakura-san is glaring down at him from behind a Sudoku.

Akira ends up eating the entire plate of curry and rice without really tasting it; he swallows around the mushy lumps that it creates when he puts it in his mouth, he also smells how good it must taste, but his tongue refuses to cooperate.

Sakura-san seems satisfied with him as washes the dishes, a curve of his lips showing just that before he's dismissed out of the cafe with the instructions to come back in the evening to assist him.

Walking through one of the small alleys of Yongen-Jaya, Akira lurches forward and throws up into an empty trashcan. The sound echoes out of the bin and makes him do it again. He wipes flecks of curry off of his lip, staring into the mess he's made, more curious than annoyed, more scared than curious. His stomach recoils once again, but it only slows down his pace instead of halting it as he heads to the train station.

Morgana remained quiet through the whole ordeal, something that he was grateful for for reasons he couldn't explain.

The hotel that Takamaki told them to meet up wasn't accessible through just his regular train pass and, as he was digging through his bag—carefully avoiding coming into contact with Morgana—for some coins, something landed on his shoulder and he croaked out a gasp before he could stop it. Heart pounding, he turned his head over his shoulder and spotted Sakamoto instead of any of the things he'd been fearing.

"Did I scare ya?" The blond asks, a lopsided grin offering a curved window of the boy's sharp teeth.

Still stunned, it takes a moment to recover before responding. He shrugs, quietly huffing out a sigh
Ryuji shrugs too, "You hyped about this place? I was lookin' the place up earlier on the net and heard they got Kobe just on stock, ya know?" His grin gets larger, impacting other areas of his face, namely the curves around his eyes, "Which basically means unlimited steak!"

The taste of his own vomit is still the predominant taste in his mouth, but Akira nods vaguely, not exactly certain about the excitement Sakamoto seemed to have.

"Anyways," Sakamoto says, digging into his pocket with one hand and pulling out a handful of coins, "We should probably hurry, Ann's probably getting pissy by now."

Without asking, and before Akira can interfere, the blond ends up paying the toll for both of them. Past the turnstiles, Ryuji doesn't stop long enough for Akira to thank him and it's not until they're seated across from each other on the next train that he's able to hand his phone over.

"Thank you?" Sakamoto reads out loud, glancing down at the screen between them then back up at him, "What for?" He asks.

Akira blinks, then replaces his message with another one.

"You paid for me at the station."

Sakamoto's eyebrows lift as he reads the message, "Did I?" He queries, as if Akira were being the strange one.

Akira nods, unsure why or how Sakamoto had forgotten something so soon after it had happened.

"Spot me on the way back, then?"

He nods again.

Then it's quiet between the two of them until they arrive at their stop. Once they step out of the station, however, Sakamoto gasps loudly. Akira glances in his direction, concerned, then tracks the blond's line of sight.

Big... Is his first thought.

Really big... He rationalizes a moment later, staring up at the massive building that's meant to be their destination.

"The picture didn't do this place justice..." Sakamoto comments.

Akira is inclined to agree, though the notion only makes him feel even more under dressed than he thought he would be.

Takamaki is waiting outside when they finally step into the shadow the building casts. She notices them right away and waves exaggeratedly in their direction. It's not hard for him to notice how well that the girl is dressed compared to himself, or to Sakamoto- who's wearing the same type of outfit he had worn to their meeting at Big Bang Burger.

Her bright red earrings are one of the first thing he notices. They tilt as her head does, exposing the sharp lines of her collared shirt as her hair moves out of the way.

His skin crawls in unease, feeling out of place even when they're only just outside.
"What took you guys so long?" She asks, tone not as intense as when Sakura-san or Takemi questioned his tardiness.

When he glances up at her, she doesn't seem particularly annoyed; smiling even, though he knows by now what smiles can hide.

He shrugs in response, glancing toward Sakamoto.

"Got lost?" He laughs.

"Kind of hard to miss this place." Takamaki snaps back, then laughs as well.

The bag under his shoulder stirs, bringing his attention to Morgana as the cat squirms out of the opening in the zipper.

"Lady Ann!" He says loudly, causing the laughter between the two to cease.

"You really don't have to call me that," Takamaki greets, "Just Ann is fine."

Morgana slinks back into the bag without another word, then things are silent for a moment before Ann shatters it with a hitch of her hand pointing towards the hotel's gilded entrance.

"Shall we?" She questions, taking a step back.

Akira watches as Ryuji follows after her, then he does the same, stepping off the noisy street and into the hotel's lobby. The sound from outside is muted the instant the door slides shut behind him, causing the hair on the base of his neck to stand on end. Instead of city noise, the lobby's air is filled with soft, barely there orchestra music that Akira doesn't notice until his ears fully adjust. The entire room emits a fancy smelling odor that he probably wouldn't recognize, along side that is the smell of cooking food that makes him want to vomit all over again.

While the lobby they walked through was decorated in pale shades of white, the place where they end up sitting is mostly dark, saccharine red. The rugs covered the fancy tiles, the table clothes, the chair covers, even the velvet ropes that tie off the eating areas are wrapped in crimson. It's an unusual moment for him; he's certain he's never seen this much of the color anywhere before.

A tall man behind a podium stops them as they're about to enter the buffet.

"Payment?" He asks, glancing between the three of them. Then two additional sets of eyes are on him, staring at him.

Oh. He realizes after a long moment of fidgeting under their looks before reaching for his pocket. Unfolding the bills, he extends them towards the man. He watches, enraptured, as the man's fingers flick through thirty thousand yen with ease; he's a little sad to see it go, especially considering how much it had cost all of them to get it. Without the bills in his hand, they feel a little empty, and he grabs onto a lock of his hair with one of them to settle them down, the other hangs loosely at his side, perpetually clammy. He wonders when the next time he'll have access to that much cash ever again.

Probably never. Akira sums up, watching as the man hands some bills back to Takamaki, who then extends the change to him. Using his free hand and whatever math his frazzled brain can come up with, he divvies up the remainder and hands it to his two teammates.

"Huh?" Takamaki drawls, "For me?"
Nodding, he hands her a small fraction of the thousands of yen they'd just spent.

Sakamoto accepts his portion with nothing more than, "Sweet!"

"If you'll follow me." The man behind the podium says, tugging on one his pristine white gloves.

The seats the man takes them to are in the back of the roped off space, though no less opulent than any of the other spaces in the place. Each of them takes up a side of the table, leaving plenty of empty space between them that is decorated with table ornaments that are wrapped in gold or made of luminescent glass.

*The utensils are even gold...* He notices after accidentally nudging one of his three spoons with his elbow as he's moving to set Morgana down in a place where he won't be easily seen, an easy enough task considering how secluded they are from the other people in the room.

"We only have an hour in here before they kick us out," Takamaki explains, "So let's go!"

Sakamoto scrambles to his feet, chasing after the blonde as she ditches the table.

The entire room smells like food; quality, well-made food, stuff that people pay tens of thousands of yen to take a piece of. He knows that, yet something in the back of his head- and his stomach- gives him the impression that this- all of this- is wrong. Akira isn't meant to be here, dressed in a jacket covered in cat hair while everyone else is in suits, dresses, and custom-made shoes.

Just under the layer of cat hair and cotton, he's sweating like a pig, only serving to make him feel even more nervous and even more out of place.

"Uh, dude?" Ryuji calls, back from the buffet with a plate in each hand; both are piled to the tipping point and Akira feels anxious just looking at them, even when the blond finally sets them on the table, only to place a hand on his shoulder.

Akira shudders, uncomfortable.

"You good?" Ryuji continues, "You look a little sick."

Akira pauses, attempting to pull the pieces of himself back together only for them to slip through his fingers and onto the floor like loose sand. He shrugs, though he's not sure how delayed his reaction is and ends up twisting a piece of his hair to try and alleviate the painful tension that's wracking up his spine and neck.

"Well, make sure to get extra everything." Sakamoto advices, smiling down at him, then to the stack of cubed meat- presumably the Kobe that he'd mentioned earlier.

Nodding dutifully, Akira takes Morgana back under his arm and steps around the table and towards the elegant looking buffet. He passes Ann on the way and, much like Sakamoto, had both of her hands full with plates, only instead of meat, hers were stacked high with desserts; most he didn't recognize, but he could smell how sweet they were when he passed and is forced to make another attempt at holding in the contents of his stomach.

He succeeds, but only just.

Morgana peers out from under his arm when he finally manages to locate a stack of plates. He only grabs one, scared that he might trip and end up wasting expensive food with a result of them being removed.
Glancing between the aisles of packed serving trays, he feels overwhelmed with options and embarrassed that he only recognizes half the things being served. Around him, the formally dressed clients ignore him completely. Not glaring, not staring; they don't even glance in his direction. It puts him at ease, like he's finally slipping back into the comfortable.

"I smell fish." Morgana whispers, sticking his nose high into the air. "That way!"

Akira follows his teammate's directions, hoping that conceding would repair whatever wounds lie between them, excluding his leg.

At Morgana's demand, he piles expensive looking sushi rolls onto his- their- plate, and quickly returns to the table before the thing threatens to topple.

His other two teammates stare at them when they return, odd expressions on their faces.

"I didn't know you liked sushi, Akira-kun." Ann comments. Her smile draws his attention to the smear of cream that's blotted the make-up on her face.

He shrugs, plucking a strip of meat from the top of one of the sushi pieces and offering it to his schoolbag.

A loud groan erupts from beside him, startling him enough to recoil his hand and activate his thief vision. The world spirals into blue for a moment, but when he blinks to adjust his new perspective, all the color melts back into his line of sight.

"So good." Morgana purrs from underneath the table, only to climb onto it a moment later, "No wonder you chose this place, Lady Ann."

Akira glances over at Takamaki, watches her pull a golden utensil from her mouth with a smile. "Of course it's good! It's a famous hotel after all..."

"Not to mention the price..." Ryuji tacks on.

The table is quiet after that, until Takamaki sits up straight, pulling her face away from a now empty plate.

"So..." She starts, staring at him, then at Sakamoto.

"So?"

"To the Phantom Thieves?" She proposes quietly, lifting up a glass filled with something translucent and bubbly that he doesn't recognize.

Across from her, Sakamoto lifts his own glass, "Phantom Thieves!" He cheers, voice loud enough that Takamaki recoils and glances around for a moment.

"Not so loud, idiot!"

Sakamoto smiles back, "'s not like anyone here would know who the Phantom Thieves of Hearts are." His voice much quieter.

"Speaking of..." Ann trails off.

"Phantom Thieves?" Sakamoto says, raising his cup back up.

"Phantom Thieves!" She cheers back, knocking her glass against Ryuji's.
They both turn towards him, "Phantom Thieves?" They ask, nearly in unison.

Akira picks up his empty glass, turning it over in his fingers, he extends it towards the middle of the table.

"Phantom Thieves!" They all cheer quietly, all except him.

They quiet down after that, both Sakamoto and Takamaki begin working on their second plate.

"I heard that the police are going to be coming to our school again to investigate about Kamoshida..." Ann picks up again, stabbing a jiggly dessert with her fork.

"Oh?" Morgana pipes in.

Ryuji growls, "Our names are gonna pop up for sure, with those old rumors about us..." His expression rapidly shifts into another smile, "But it's cool that people will still be talking about the Phantom Thieves, right?"

"Yeah, but, um..." Takamaki says in reply, spinning a finger around the rim of her empty glass, the bubbly drink long gone. "I think someone is stalking me... or following me, at least."

Just as easily as she'd raised the mood between them, Takamaki was able to bring it spiraling downwards.

Adjacent to him, Sakamoto starts choking on a piece of meat and ends up spitting it onto the table cloth.

"Stalking?" The blond asks between sips of dark soda, "Someone stalking you?"

Takamaki nods, her gaze is cast towards her plate despite it being empty, "I just get this feeling around school, and when I'm walking to my line, you know? I feel it every day, but I'm just... too scared to look behind me, you know?"

Akira swallows around the lump her words had managed to lodge in his throat. He does understand how she feels, has felt that exact same feeling in Leblanc for the past week. He thinks of Kamoshida, the man who had made everyone at Shujin suffer; wonders if, somehow, the man had avoided prison and was still laying a claim on Ann's life.

"Why would they be followin' you?" Sakamoto questions, frowning deeply, "You sure it ain't because of your modelin' thing?"

Ann shrugs, drooping down into the cushions under her. "I think it might have to do with what we were talking about earlier." She admits.

"About being phantom thieves?"

Takamaki nods again, "Or about Ka-Kamoshida or... I dunno. Maybe I'm just being paranoid..." She laughs, a quiet sound that's drowned out by the classical music playing around them.

There's quiet again, as Takamaki wipes at her eyes, spreading black smudges on the back of her hands. "S-sorry... This was supposed to be a celebration and I kinda blew it."

"Kinda?" Ryuji quips, smiling across the table.

Ann throws her napkin at him, then the crust of something she didn't finish.
"H-hey!" The blond yelps, wiping crumbs off the table, "What are you, nine?"

Something about Sakamoto's reply sets her off. She starts laughing, but trails of tears start sliding over her cheeks.

Ryuji rushes across the perimeter of the table, grabbing onto the blonde's shoulders, "Ann?" He questions. Takamaki doesn't respond with words, instead she pushes her face into the bright purple of Ryuji's jacket, burying the cries that come out as muffled screams. When he glances around, nobody else seems to notice except the people at their table.

"Lady Ann..." Morgana calls out gently, stepping over him and onto the table, closing the distance between the two of them.

Akira fiddles with the rice he refused to feed Morgana, smashing it down with his spoon while he tries to think of something his teammate would find comforting.

"I've just..." Ann ends up saying, pulling away from Ryuji to bury her face in her hands. "Since we got here, I can't stop thinking about Shiho... We've always wanted to come here and with her not here it feels..."

Suzui... He tries his best to drown out his old memories of Suzui, of seeing her exposed and purple or plummeting from the sky; tries to imagine her sitting with them, flinging food back at one of them. For some reason, he just can't picture it.

"Lonely." Ryuji ends up finishing, still rubbing at Takamaki's shaking form.

"You can still do that with her." He sets his phone down in front of her.

"Akira's sayin' something to you, Ann." Ryuji announces quietly.

The blond's presence seems to be enough to pull Takamaki out of herself, and she glances down at the screen. She coughs out a noise that he can't identify, then glances towards him. For some reason, he finds himself unable to look away from her; finds himself taken in by how watery and how blue her gaze is, and how much sadness she shows that even he can identify it.

She laughs though, and Akira is left confused.

"I guess you're right." Ann says, reaching over and grabbing his hand as it was reaching up to tug at his hair; he hadn't even noticed it moving.

Her hands are wet and cold.

So different from her persona... He can't help compare.

"I think Shiho would really like you." Ann whispers to him between a combination of sobbing and laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Okay. First, I'd like to apologize for my extended vacation from updating. I usually always work on a schedule, and if I get off of it, I have difficulties adjusting accordingly. So, I'd like to thank all of you that have been reading and reviewing while
I'm gone, it really means a lot. That aside, I've moved into a new flat, so if anyone tryna pay my bills hit me up.

Anyway, if you made it this far, thanks for reading, leave a review if you should feel so inclined.
Chapter Title brought to you by: Pastel has joined the game
Their hour isn't up by the time all of the food hits them, Morgana included, then Ryuji is leading him through the confusing hallways as they try, seemingly in vain, to find an operating bathroom. If the building they were in were any less historically relevant or any less opulent, Akira's certain the task would be much simpler. As it is now, they're on the top floor, tip-toeing past conference rooms, each one of them with a different voice filtering between the cracks in the doors.

The men's room is just as fancy as the hallways outside of them, ornate carvings crafted in gold, with heavy stone as it's flooring. The same dark red from the buffet box them in on each side.

Morgana pulls him out of his observations with a loud groan from just below his shoulder.

"Joker, h-hurry..." He moans.

Akira hurries towards one of the stalls. He hears Sakamoto taking the one right beside them. He barely has time to pull the lid open before Morgana is puking into the bowl. The sound echoes loudly in the empty bathroom and he's grateful that it was just the three of them in the room.

*Nobody deserves to hear these noises from a cat...* He muses in between deep breaths, doing his best to keep his own stomach under control while he positions Morgana over the toilet.

"I think that's all of it..." Morgana says some time later, running a paw over his jaw, wiping away drips of liquid that had threatened to drip off of it.

Akira uses his shoe to close the lid as well as flush it all away, doing his best to ignore the guilt that spawns when he leaves a smudge on the otherwise shiny and pristine handle. Tucking Morgana back into his bag, Akira considers checking on his other teammate, but decides, instead, to wait outside when Morgana begins to complain about the smell.

Sakamoto comes out of the restroom ten minutes later, looking less pale, and with a small smile on his face that shows off a number of teeth.

"Some buffet, huh?" The blond asks before another voice clamors over his.

"There's still no update on the case?" Someone- a man- questions. Something about his voice snaps at every fiber of his being, at the same time, it's like he's being entombed in ice. Akira freezes, shuddering from the bone-deep unease, only to be pushed to the side as a group of men start to thunder past him.

He stumbles against one of the walls, nearly toppling over a small, decorative table that probably costs more than he does, and hesitates in his apology.

The men don't stop moving, nor do they stop talking, even when Sakamoto yells after them.

"H-hey, assholes!" He yells out, recovering from being pushed against the opposite walls.

"I don't care about your opinion, you incompetent buffoon! When I say pick up the pace, you do
Akira glances up from his bow, gazing through the ends of his hair and landing on a bald-headed man with thick-framed glasses.

Familiar... Is the only thought that gets across before Ryuji is tugging on his arm, all but pulling him down the hallway and after the group of business men that had just trampled over them. Something about the situation, perhaps his reaction, draws Arsene's presence from wherever it was hiding; like the volume suddenly being turned up from nothingness, a static that he's grown to ignore.

"Hmm..." Arsene says so suddenly that he mistakes it for something that had actually occurred in the real world.

His persona says nothing more though, and Sakamoto pulls them to a stop in front of the elevators, where the group of men shoved past a group of people that had been waiting. None of the people around them said anything.

Nobody but Sakamoto.

"Hey!" Ryuji barks out, pounding a fist on one the elevator's golden doors as it's about to slide shut.

"We're in a hurry." One of the men in front says, staring down at them.

"Don't bother with them!" The bald one hisses back just as the doors pull shut.

Ryuji kicks at the doors, then once more, leaving scuff marks across its gilded surface. Around them, the other people that had been waiting for the elevators start whispering; Akira can feel their gazes start to dart between them and he ducks his head, embarrassed at drawing so much attention, even if it wasn't him directly. He tugs on Ryuji's jacket before the blond releases another kick against the doors. His teammate's posture freezes, then relaxes completely.

"What the hell was up with that guy?" He asks once another elevator opens up for them.

Sakamoto's voice echoes loudly off the lift's walls, the large box completely empty except for the three of them despite the large number of people waiting behind them. When the doors had first opened, they'd ignored its presence completely once he and Sakamoto had stepped on, or at least pretended to. Morgana took the privacy as an opportunity to remove himself from the bag and was pacing around the room they were traveling in.

"Not even botherin' to hide the fact that he thinks he's better than everyone else..." Ryuji continues, tapping his fingers on one of his crosses arms. Everything about his expression makes him think of Skull, and he'd be lying to himself if he didn't feel a little afraid of the other boy at the moment; his posture was coiled up, like he might explode at any moment. Perfect for the MetaVerse, a definite threat in the real world. That didn't stop him, however, from feeling guilty about that fear, about the incident that had him doubting his teammate.

"You shouldn't lose your temper over this..." Morgana says, just as Sakamoto snaps. The blond's leg shoots back, only to rush forward and connect with the wall opposite of him with a loud bang. Around them, as well as above and below, the lift creaks ominously for a moment. Akira takes a step back, narrowing himself against the furthest corner as the floor beneath them quivers in response to the force.

Sakamoto huffs out a big sigh, his form shrinking down with it. "You're probably right... It's just..."
Shitty fucking adults make me so fucking angry, ya know?"

Akira isn't sure if the blond is expecting an answer when Ryuji looks up at him, but he ends up nodding; Morgana does as well, making a weird noise that seems to shrink Ryuji's posture further.

"That's why you became a Phantom Thief, isn't it? To change the hearts of people like that?" Morgana asks, standing in front of Ryuji, seemingly unfazed by the outbursts.

Ryuji's silence stretches on for a long moment before he answers, "Y-yeah... That's exactly why we did it, huh?" He responds, looking up at him again.

Akira nods in reply. It was true that they want to change hearts now, but before then, everything was about getting away from Kamoshida or trying to fulfill their end of Morgana's deal. They could have stopped- he could have stopped- yet they continued to traverse in Mementos, changing hearts still. It sounds better in the real world, where they're not shooting at people to get them to change, or threatening their lives with a fiery death. To him, at least, being a Phantom Thief was something the other two were more excited about than him. Something about the whole ordeal just seemed too strange for reality, even when he could see it with his own eyes. The MetaVerse was a place of violence that resulted in good things happening.

*Does the bad outweigh the good, though?* He questions for the first time. They could have just as easily killed Kamoshida as they had stopped him. They were even celebrating that lack of death with money they'd all but stolen from the man. Everything about it should sounded like something he shouldn't be doing, especially on parole. But then, inevitably, always inevitably, he thought of Suzui. If they'd been faster in dealing with Kamoshida, if they'd discovered the MetaVerse a week, or even a day sooner, they could have prevented her suicide attempt. With Kamoshida gone, he wondered what she would be feeling, if she'd be grateful that the man had confessed to his crimes or if she'd be happier if he'd been stripped of their desires like Takamaki had been on the brink of doing.

A part of him was glad, though. Glad that school would be easier for everyone now that Kamoshida was gone, himself included, as well as his two teammates, and Mishima, who could have ended up just as bad, maybe even worse, than Suzui.

*Is this all worth it?* He asks nobody in particular. He thinks back, recalling the feeling of the bones in his arm being shattered into splinters, when he'd been stabbed through the same arm in Kamoshida's palace or when he'd shattered all of his fingernails- again on the same arm- when they ran from the collapsing castle.

"Of course it is." Arsene responds without preamble. Akira grips at his head, a sudden headache forming in tandem with Arsene's presence. "You saved her, and them, we can save all of them..." He trails off, retreating back until he's just static at the back of his head.

When Akira nods, it's more to himself than Arsene.

*It's worth it...* The pain is something he can deal with, especially when all of their wounds are ones they can erase within seconds.

*It's worth it.* He considers, resolute.

"What took you guys so long?" Takamaki questions once the three of them return to their table, or at least, their table for the next thirteen minutes.

"Why're you all pissy?" Ryuji fires back as he's sliding in on the far side of the table.
Akira turns back towards Ann.

_Had she been pissy?_

He hadn't noticed.

"Sorry... I just, uh, had a run-in with some old woman a second ago." Ann sinks back into the cushions under her, visibly deflating as she continues, "She bumped into me, but then started yelling at me when she dropped her plate like it was my fault or something."

Ryuji, if anything, grows larger as Ann continues to shrink down, "Sounds like a real bitch."

Takamaki snorts into one of the hotel's fancy napkins, "Yeah, I guess so... But, the restaurant workers all looked at me with this disapproving expression..."

"I wonder if we're out of place here." She continues eventually.

Something in him loosens considerably after she says that, words he's been dying to say but unable to push them through; Takamaki understood. From her face though, Akira almost wished she didn't, that he was alone in that way.

"Fuckin' feels like it."

Ann looks up, and Akira does to, spying across the table where Ryuji is still fuming.

"Did something happen in the bathroom or something?"

Ryuji looks towards him, and Akira stares down at the gilded silverware on the table between them.

"Somethin' like that," The blond explains, "Some asshat and his crew pushed us outta the way when we were headed back down, _then_ the assholes around us kept glaring at us like we were... I dunno..."

"A bug?" Ryuji makes a noise in agreement.

"We can change that though," Morgana pipes up, pouncing his way back onto the tablecloth, "Not all of them, but we can change their views on people like you. This power you've all awakened happened for a reason, your potential to alter hearts isn't just for people like Kamoshida, it can be for everyone that looks down on people."

The table goes silent for a long moment, their time limit drawing closer to its limit.

"Us." Ryuji finally says, shattering the tense quiet.

"Huh?"

"You said, 'people like you,' it's us, ain't it?" He explains.

Akira catches Takamaki nodding along.

Morgana nods as well, nearly stepping an a plate of beef remains as he steps into the center of the table, "Us you mean, like..." He clears his throat, "You're right, you're... really right, Ryuji."

"Phantom Thieves. Woo. Remember?" Takamaki adds, pumping her fist into the air.
"Of course..."

Ryuji leans forward, pushing plates aside as he does so, "So you think we should start looking for another palace, then?"

Ann nods, then Morgana nods along with her. So Akira nods as well, ignoring, or doing his best, to ignore the nervous clench his stomach gives at the proposal.

"That's settled then," Ryuji continues, "So what kinda guy should we go after, a celebrity? A CEO? Somethin' like that'll definitely get us on the news."

"The news? Aren't we supposed to be phantom thieves, like being in the shadows and stuff?" Takamaki questions, also leaning forward, "Then again, if we can get people to believe in us, it might give people the courage to deal with their own problems..."

"My thoughts exactly, Lady Ann."

Takamaki opens her mouth to say something, but Akira's attention is drawn to the figure stepping towards their table, the same one who was guarding the entrance.

"Looks like our time's up." Ryuji says, taking to his feet, "We can talk more about it later, yeah?"

Akira nods absentmindedly, doing his best to shove Morgana back into his bag without being overt. Not an easy task when the cat yowls loudly as he scoops him up.

"I'm afraid your party must leave or pay for an additional hour." The man says, tugging on one lapel of his coat.

He scoots out of the other end of the table before bowing towards the man respectfully, then, carefully concealing Morgana, he follows Sakamoto and Takamaki as they make they trek across the restaurant.

"You think that Phan-site thing will have anybody with a palace on it?" Ryuji asks once the four of them are standing under the hotel's awning. In the time they'd been in the building, it had begun drizzling outside; a light shower that he saw rather than felt, though it was much cooler than when he'd first arrived, now that he thought about it.

"Rain, huh..." Morgana says from below.

"I don't see why it wouldn't." Takamaki says in way of reply. When Akira glances in her direction, the girl is pulling the back end of her coat jacket over her head as makeshift umbrella. "We can check it out later." She tacks on before running out from underneath the awning. Akira can hear her footsteps splashing on the wet concrete, but he eventually loses track of her through the sea of umbrellas. He envies them for their preparedness in that moment.

"You headin' for the station?" Ryuji asks, pulling the tail end of his own jacket to cover his face.

Akira nods, pulling the hood of his jacket over his head, praying that it'd be enough to stave off the chill that's threatening at his face and hands. With a second thought, he turns his attention to Morgana, carefully zipping up some of his bag and leaving just enough, hopefully, of a gap for the cat to breath.

Sakamoto doesn't run off like Takamaki had, instead, he strolls towards where the station is. That's
not to say that the blond was particularly careful in his gait, he doesn't bother moving around any of the deep puddles that form as water begins flooding the sidewalk. His shoes slap noisily on the ground as they continue walking.

As promised, he pays for both his and Ryuji's train fare before they climb aboard, heading towards Shibuya at a nauseating pace; his stomach, for one reason or another, hypersensitive to the sensation he'd been growing used to.

"You uh," Ryuji starts, just as the train pulls into the station that connects their lines, "Wanna check out Mementos?"

When Akira looks up, the blond is smiling, even with his hair soaked through and limp.

"Sounds like a good idea to me, Joker." Morgana provides.

He shrugs in reply, neither a yes nor no.

Ryuji already has his phone in hand and Akira can see the swirling of the MetaNav as the blond activates it.

His head hurts, then he's comfortable, despite being soaked through not a moment ago.

"Oh, he's here!" A familiar voice calls out over Ryuji's, even though they should be alone in this place. "Inmate! Inmate!"

Akira glances towards one corner of the would-be platform and spots both Justine and Caroline standing between a glowing blue door.

"We have something we'd like to discuss with you, inmate, regarding your rehabilitation." Justine calls out.

Akira looks towards Skull, then Mona. Neither had seemed to notice the two girls, or their voices.

He steps around the two of them, towards the pair of wardens. Neither of them say a word as he's whisked away, another headache replaces the last one as he's thrust into the Velvet Room. Caroline steps in front of the gate that separates them, slashing her baton against the metal bars between them and making the entire room ring and echo.

Justine steps out as well, staring right at him and pinning him with her singular eye; it's red, like Caroline's had been for a moment at the other door. "It would seem, at least to us, the holders of power, that you're very... weak. Ill-suited for the avoidance of ruin, even after you've awakened to your own gifts, and still after you have forged bonds with us."

Caroline recoils from the door, staring at Justine with an open mouth, "W-we?" Her own eye flashes a bright red crimson when she stares into the cell, "I don't see any of that, Justine, I can't see his power levels at all... just his personas... and the wild card."

"Hm." Justine replies, her whole body shifts as she stares, instead, at her fellow warden, "But when I see you, I see your power, Caroline... and no persona to be seen."

Caroline shifts too, mirroring the other, "And when I look at you, I can see the compendium behind you..."

They both turn towards him, their eyes returned to their usual golden color, but Caroline is the one that speaks first, "What could this all mean... two holders of power, yet... different."
"That doesn't matter right now, nor does it concern the inmate." Justine interjects, "What does matter is the task we've been left by our master concerning his rehabilitation."

Even as they stared directly at him, Akira had the feeling they weren't speaking to him, but rather at him. Which wasn't unusual, but the way they stared at him and continued to talk as if he weren't there was disturbing.

"These sets of tasks will, without fail, help you in your journey towards strength. Along with your bonds, to us and to our master, they will be necessary for you to avoid the coming ruin." Justine continues, "Your task is to capture this persona and return it back to the velvet room where Caroline and I will examine it." She says, pulling a sheet of paper from her clipboard and handing it to him through the bars.

Akira steps forward and takes it, doing his best to commit the shadow to memory before nodding towards the warden.

Justine nods back, "But first, our master has requested something else of us; another necessity as a guest of this realm. Caroline, if you will."

Caroline steps away from the gate between them and holsters the metal baton at her waist before backing up and out of sight. Akira watches her disappear through the gaps in the bars, and listens as her voice filters through the prison walls. Caroline eases back into his vision, dragging something behind her by its handle. The construct is impossibly tall, almost reaching the prison's ceiling, but covered in an ominous blue curtain. Justine steps aside as well, tugging another, identical, curtained figure into his field of vision. The two wardens park the colossal figures on either side of Igor's desk; the man that's usually seated behind it is absent and he finds the empty chair and desk strange to examine in how ordinary they seem.

In unison, the two curtains are pulled away, revealing two guillotines crafted in dark blue metal.

*What...*

"These devices will allow us to fuse the physical and spiritual attributes of your personas." Justine explains.

Caroline continues, "Like this, inmate!"

The Velvet Room erupts in pale blue fire and Akira shields his eyes from the blast. When he looks back up, there are two shadows floating in the middle of the room.

"Get over here, maggots!"

The two personas flinch violently, then float towards the two imposing towers in the room.

Akira shields his eyes from what happens next, but he hears everything that happens in the darkness. The two blades fall, skittering downwards like shattering ice and crunch loudly as they pivot through the two shadows. He can hear them cry out in the seconds that it takes for them to die; then the room awakens with a flurry of energy, strong enough to tug and pull at his clothes, he can feel it messing up his hair as well, but it stops as soon as it starts. The noncognate breeze simmers into cessation and Akira glances around his hands, spying only one persona instead of two.

"This," Justine continues, "Is the power of persona fusion."

He nods slowly.
"If there other business you wish to conduct within the Velvet Room?" She questions.

He shakes his head, still reeling.

"T-then I guess I'll return you back." Caroline informs before everything turns into nothing.

When he spirals back into consciousness, the first thing he sees is the door to the Velvet Room, the two wardens are absent from guarding it, however, and Akira glances around for them for a moment.

"Uh, dude?" Skull questions, dropping a hand onto his shoulder. Akira spies the bright yellow from his peripheral and turns around on his heel, causing the gloved hand to slide off of him. "You were spacing out pretty hard there for a sec." The blond continues.

Akira nods in reply, unsure if he should- or could- explain the things he'd just seen.

He steps away from the Velvet Room's entrance and towards the broken escalators that would lead them into Mementos, both Skull and Mona follow after him, sliding down the steps in a pace that he can't maintain. They end up at the bottom of the platform before he does, despite his early start, making him the last one to climb into Mona's bus form. The engine revs to life with loud purrs that make his skin crawl and soon the three of them are navigating dark tunnels.

It takes an hour before they stumble, coincidentally, into the shadow that matches the drawing in his pocket. It comes easily, almost enthusiastically, when Skull shoves a gun in its face and Akira absorbs it inside of him. The thing carves out a space inside of his very soul, jostling the others that share the space; they're displeased with the situation, but Akira isn't sure what to do- if there's anything that he can do- to calm them down. They find the stone door soon after, just as the headache is starting to coil down his neck.

Out from under the two of them, Morgana transforms back into his natural state and steps in front of the door.

It remains shut, not reacting at all to their presence.

"There must be some kind of trick to this..." The cat murmurs against the detailed carvings, leaving him, and Skull, to stand around the empty walkway.

Akira sits down on the floor, mostly exhausted, though part of him remains cognizant of the howling of the shadows above them. Skull squats down on the other side of the room, prodding and massaging his leg. He can't help but wonder how the blond manages to crawl the endless pathways with the steel appendages attached to him, even with Mona carrying them most of the time, without injuring himself; Skull was definitely more durable than he looked, even when he bends over himself.

Mona sighs heavily sometime later, finally stepping away from the door and turning towards them. "Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time, I can feel the both of you getting stronger with each fight."

"Well duh." Skull shoots back, climbing to his feet and sticking his bright yellow gloves inside of the endless black of his uniform.

Morgana doesn't reply, choosing to climb up the broken elevator wordlessly.

Climbing back up was much less hectic than it had been the last time they were here, so he figured Morgana's statement held some truth, even if he couldn't see the progress for himself.
"Finally..." Skull drags out, rolling his shoulders once they've reached the exit to Mementos.

Akira steps off towards the side, walking directly into the glowing blue gate that houses the Velvet Room.

"I-Inmate!" Caroline greets, "Did you forget something?"

He doesn't have time to answer before the other warden interjects on his behalf, "No, Caroline, it would seem that the inmate has brought the persona we have requested of him..."

Caroline takes a step backwards, "So quickly?"

Justine nods, "It would seem so, I can feel its potential inside of him."

"Call forth the persona, then, inmate!"

He complies, ejecting the presence from his mind- a sensation that feels almost like sneezing and leaves his nose itchy. It crows the space between him and the cell's door, a blue, flame-like aura surrounds it.

"Proficient work, inmate, if you complete all of your tasks this quickly, you'll escape ruin in no time!" Caroline comments as she steps forward. For the first time, something reaches into the cell he's trapped in- Caroline's hand- but it disappears just as quickly as it had entered, taking the persona that was between them with it. The cell feels infinitely larger without either of those things in it with him, and Akira shrinks away from the open space, uncomfortable.

"Our master will assign us your next task when it's ready, for now, you must leave this place."

He's ejected before he can either bow or wave, and is thrown back into Mementos so quickly he's certain that, for a moment, that he'd gone blind.

"Ready to get outta here?" Ryuji asks from the other end of the room.

Akira nods, waiting for Morgana to catch up to them before he activates the MetaNav.

It's still raining when they finally exit the MetaVerse, but instead of the previous misting that it had been, the rain pelted down from above. The current roared as it splashed against the concrete just outside of the station.

Beside him, Ryuji yawns loudly, stretching his arms and popping multiple bones. He can barely hear it, but he knows those things are there.

He's very tired.

"I'm gonna head home, don't forget we got school tomorrow." Ryuji imparts, smiling down at him. Akira isn't sure why. "See ya!" The blond says, disappearing into the sea of umbrellas.

Akira finds the closest wall from the entrance of Mementos and slides down it as soon as his back connects with it. He's asleep before he can really help it, before he can adjust Morgana to a more comfortable position.

The rain is still a never-ending static when he wakes up, roaring around him, but not touching him.

"Excuse me..." A voice, masculine and formal; and far too close.

His entire body tense before he can help it. Curling in on himself, Akira wraps his arms around his
folded up knees and squeezes, most likely squishing Morgana, but it's not like he can help it.

"You're magnificent." The same voice says.

Akira glances up at that; a police officer would never say anything like that, nobody would ever say anything like that to him.

The man is tall and, from where he's hunched over himself, Akira has to bend backwards just to see his face.

_Creepy..._ Is his first thought, when his gaze clashes with the other's, staring into the watery blue eyes of a stranger who'd been standing over him while he slept.

_I guess I was in a public place._ Akira rationalizes, still unsure of how to proceed.

"You radiate a well of sadness like an aura. It is endlessly captivating, if I might say..." The guy says, still staring down at him, unblinking, even as he continues, "Even with this weather, I can still feel you, calling out to me with the tilt of your jaw, the furrow in your brow. Were you having a dream of sorts? You were scratching at your neck, it did hinder the feeling I get when I'm this near to you, yet added something vital that it had been missing; serenity clashing with your ferocity. I think, though, that this sketch only scratches the potential that I feel coming out of you. Your face screams out with innocence, but your eyes are..."

Akira blinks, wondering if he should start running.

"Please, let me paint you." The guy says.

_Definitely should have ran..."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's taking so long for this to get rolling.
Chapter title is thanks to Fist-kun.
The man continues talking down at him and with him sitting there on the floor, feeling embarrassed and confused, Akira feels like the situation is almost familiar until another man- one much older than either of them- steps in beside the first and joins in staring down at him.

"Yusuke-kun," The older man says, not turning away from him at all as he addresses- presumably- the other man, "I'd began wondering where you might have wandered off to, you know that we had a prior engagement to attend to with the exhibit..."

"Yes, Sensei, of course." The other says, also still staring down at him. "I had every intention of being there to help with the preparations, but my passion seems to have lead me astray..."

"Passion?" The man questions, Akira watches as his feet shuffle in place, the shifting of his weight under the long, concealing robes that he's wearing. "You mean to tell me that this person has sparked your artistry, Yusuke-kun?"

"Yes, Sensei." The younger stranger says, "My next piece, it has to be with him as my model, no other will do. No other has chilled me to my core, but, at the same time, set my fingers ablaze with such passion." The man's hands move rapidly while he explains himself, but eventually still, extending a piece of paper towards the older man, who unfolds it.

"Remarkable..." The sound makes his shoulder blades tense back towards his spine and he does his best to curl in on himself.

"It's like they've forgotten I'm here..." The feeling of being talked around is familiar, but unsavory, especially when he has no way to excuse himself without being rude; they'd probably just chase him down anyway.

"Well, Yusuke-kun, I approve of your choice in subjects, of course." The older one says, folding the piece of paper back up and tucking it into one of the folds on his formal robes, "But I still require your assistance in setting up the exhibit."

"Of course, Sensei."

The older man walks off, but the younger stranger doesn't follow like Akira had been expecting him to and when he looks up, he finds the man still staring down at him. He swipes a strand of hair, a loose lock in hair that's so black it's midnight, and tucks it behind his ear, exposing another icy blue eye to him and reminding Akira that it had been still raining, and still kind of is. He can't read any emotion behind the stranger's eyes now that they're both exposed, nor any intentions as the man rips another piece of paper from the notebook he's carrying and bends down to hand it to him. Akira gets an extended look at his face when he does this, but finds himself looking towards the ground between them- or what's left of it- and blindly reaching for the offered paper.

If the stranger finds anything about his behavior strange, and since Akira finds the entire situation quite bizarre, he figures the other would definitely feel it as well, he doesn't say anything more than, "I will leave you with my contact information, and Madarame-sensei's as well, I look forward to cooperating with you..." The way the man trails off has Akira looking back up through frizzy bangs, just enough to see the stranger's eyes go wide for a moment, before he folds forward from
his standing position; his hair brushes past in a floppy arc and flicks stray droplets of water down onto him and Morgana, who's concealed between them.

"My apologizes, I hadn't yet introduced myself. My name is Kitagawa Yusuke, I'm studying at Kosei High's Fine-Arts division as a second-year. I'm sure you already recognized him but, that was Madarame-sensei, he is my mentor in my dreams of becoming an artist."

Akira nods dutifully when Kitagawa stops talking, but doesn't respond otherwise.

_Is he really the same age as me_? When he takes in the stranger's stony face and eloquent phrasing, Akira has a hard time believing that Kitagawa was anywhere in his teens.

_Should I know him_? Part of him asks as an afterthought and, not for the first time, feeling completely ignorant about the situation. The guilt of _not_ knowing makes him almost tempted to search through the crowd for the older man to see if he might recognize him on a second glance.

He realizes then, after an extended silence in which the stranger stood over him, that he was expected to introduce himself in return. Out of reflex- and some embarrassment- he grabs at a lock of his own hair and starts twisting it beneath his fingers; it blocked off half his ability to respond, but his other- still free- hand lay limp in his lap with the paper that Kitagawa had handed him.

"And you are?" Kitagawa questions.

Akira shrugs, not sure how he should be reacting at all.

"Yes, yes, I suppose it's better if I don't know, it may impact my subjectivity if I form an attachment to you before I take you upon my canvas..." He says, then leans down until they're sharing eye levels. Something about Kitagawa's words, or the intense stare he's receiving draw a heat that sparks across his neck and settles into his lungs. He feels stupid, and when Kitagawa hands over even more pieces of paper, he fumbles with them until they fall carelessly into his lap.

Kitagawa doesn't seem to notice how his words had affected him, and Akira's not sure if that's a good thing or not, but he is grateful for it.

"Two weeks from now, Sensei is holding a gallery for his newest pieces not far from here, we can further discuss the details at that location." It's the last thing that Kitagawa says to him before walking off.

Akira tenses for a moment, focusing his attention into his vision until the world erupts in a blue sheen. When he glances around, he doesn't see any new threads ejecting from him, or from the crowd. The sound of Morgana unzipping and climbing out from his schoolbag are sudden enough to break his concentration and the world shifts back into the dark atmosphere of the train station around them.

"That was... highly suspicious." The cat admonishes instantly, staring up at him with a narrowed look, "And disturbing to listen to."

Akira nods in agreement, flicking through the wad of papers that the man had handed to him, all but the first one that Kitagawa had handed him were tickets to the art gallery Kitagawa had mentioned.

_At least twenty..._ He notes, tossing them into the bag that Morgana had vacated.

_Was that a marketing tactic_? If it was, it wasn't very effective.
"Does the name Madarame sound familiar to you? I don't recognize it at all."

He shakes his head, not looking down at Morgana as he does so, even when he feels grateful that he wasn't completely alone in this, even if Morgana had been hiding the entire time he was dealing with two- potentially dangerous- strangers. Still, something about the entire situation didn't seem natural to him, even after he collected Morgana and boarded the train to Yongen-Jaya; nobody had ever looked at him twice in his entire life, now someone wanted to paint him, had spent an unknown amount of time sketching him while Akira had been passed out against the station's entrance, and invited him to an art exhibit all in the same minute.

_A famous someone, apparently._ Part of him filled in unhelpfully, though not even that modifier of the truth impacted his decision at all. He had no intention of contacting Kitagawa or Madarame, and even less intention to be studied while he was unconscious in the future. He'd have to make sure he made it back to Leblanc- or Yongen-Jaya at least- after they explored Mementos, or anywhere else in Mementos.

Nobody looked in his direction when he entered Leblanc, even when the bell chimed noisily from above him. Something about the lack of reaction soothed the uneasy feeling he'd had since waking up at the station. When he sat at the bar, Sakura-san looked up at him from behind a book and he instantly regretted his lapse in judgement.

"Hungry?" His caretaker mumbles so thickly that it takes him a few seconds to decipher, then another minute or so to determine an answer.

His stomach was uncomfortable, like it was grabbing at either end of itself and squeezing down; hunger was an undeniable conclusion, considering he'd thrown up breakfast and barely ate of the food they spent almost thirty thousand yen on. Leblanc wasn't _not_ fancy, but nothing about it made him want to scrub his own filth off in a vain attempt at belonging.

His insides growled at the prospect of Sakura-san's food, as well, unlike the thought of lobster tails or high-grade beef.

Akira nodded. Sakura-san nods in return.

"Just hurry up, then head straight upstairs. School starts tomorrow, doesn't it?" His guardian asks, setting down a plate and glass in front of him.

He nods again, tucking into his meal, taking care not to eat too quickly and repeating his earlier mistake; he doesn't eat a lot of it either, just enough to make the primal part of him quiet down. The curry's warmth is enough to placate the strung-up muscles in his shoulders, enough that his heart stops racing even when he can barely keep his eyes open. The rest of the meal is washed down the drain, then Akira heads back upstairs, depositing Morgana on the floor halfway to the attic's bed. He barely finds the energy to plug his phone in and take off his glasses before he collapses onto the mattress.

He's asleep before the dust can resettle around him; dreamless and unaware. Both sensations are welcome in a way that keeps the spring chill from seeping down into his skin.

Waking up, he hadn't expected the blinding orange that painted Leblanc's attic. He'd only meant to rest until the cafe had closed for the night, then go the bathhouse. Instead, he was sweating in the morning glow under a dusty comforter.

Akira turned off his alarm, then swipes off the one that he'd obviously missed through the night. There's a few other notifications from his teammates that he allows himself to ignore until he's
brushed his teeth and washed his face. Once he's seated at Leblanc's bar- and in his spot- he manages his phone with one hand and a spoon with the other, taking breaks in between to sip at the glass of water between them. The majority of the messages are Ryuji and Ann talking back and forth in their Phantom Thieves chat, so he doesn't respond to any of their comments towards each other while he finishes his breakfast.

Sakura-san doesn't say anything when he leaves the cafe, even when Morgana's face ends up sticking out in plain sight as he's carrying the cat out of the cafe.

He figures it was going to be a decent morning, at least.

Ryuji was waiting outside of the school gates when Akira was walking up to them and spotted him almost immediately as he turned around the corner. The blond ended up meeting him halfway to said gates and threw a heavy arm over his shoulder; Akira was confused by the display, but grateful, at least, that it didn't turn out to be a repeat of the last time Sakamoto had tried the same thing. He supposed he should be proud of himself, at least a bit, but the sensation was more shameful than indulgent.

"Ya find anything yet?" Sakamoto ends up saying by way of greeting.

Akira shakes his head; he hadn't even thought about starting to look for a target, even when he vowed that he was ready.

"Same."

It's the only conversation they have before Sakamoto splits off, heading in the opposite direction once they reach the second floor.

Kawakami is waiting at the front of the classroom and he almost doesn't register the information in time before he narrowly steps around her, but when Akira turns around, heart racing, to apologize for almost running into her, she isn't even looking in his direction, and doesn't even seem to recognize that he's standing there.

He takes his seat, not sure if it's appropriate to feel as guilty as he does.

Takamaki turns around in her chair to face him, "Morning."

All at once, the classroom around them shifts. He doesn't have to glance around to see that their entire class is staring in their direction, staring down Takamaki for engaging with him and definitely gauging how he's going to respond. Whispers about his violent tendencies made his cheeks flush in shame, his probation was still a sore spot after so many weeks.

Carefully, Akira nods his return of the sentiment, feeling stuff and more like an outsider than he had in weeks. Once the rumors about Kamoshida had died down, his classmates attentions towards him had dropped significantly, with Takamaki and Mishima being the exceptions; all of his progress at fading into the background had dissipated into nothing, despite his best efforts.

Plucking at his hair, he chances a glance towards Takamaki, but finds her still sitting sideways in her chair and still leaning an elbow onto his desk. Her face is smooth and unreadable, more so than usual. In all, she doesn't seem affected in the slightest at anything their classmates are saying.

Then again, it's not like they're talking about her... He wonders if that makes it better or worse.

"Alright, class." Kawakami calls over the buzzing, "As you've probably heard, all gym classes for next week are cancelled due to what transpired at the assembly before the break. Instead, we're
supposed to be offering... student guidance and silent study." She explains, reading off of a clipboard in one hand.

"Since the police are still investigating Kamoshida-sensei, it would be in all of your best interests to not go around talking about the incident." She sighs lowly, looking down at the floor in front of her. Akira watches her hands clench around the clipboard she's holding. "As a teacher... I'm ashamed that I hadn't noticed how a student- students, were suffering like that. I'm not making excuses or defending Kamoshida when I say that he seemed like a normal teacher. That said, student counseling will be held in the faculty office for anyone who feels they need it."

Kawakamki sighs again, slapping the clipboard onto her desk, only to pick up a textbook right next to it.

Inside of his desk, he can barely make out the sound of Morgana mumbling to himself, something that Akira can't quite catch.

He zones out of the lecture as soon as it begins, watching his teacher, then the next, and the next, without hearing anything they say, replacing their monologues with one of his own.

Should I go? He ends up asking, not for the first time that day.

"Why bother." Comes the near-immediate reply from Arsene, leaning into Akira's presence with his own.

Akira shrugs, unsure if Arsene can feel or see his reaction; it feels like answering himself more than another being entirely.

He decides not to go, fairly certain nobody on the faculty would appreciate his presence there when there were students who'd been dealing with Kamoshida for years longer than he had. He wonders if Suzui would have gone if she hadn't been the precipitating incident; then he wonders if Takamaki would go, or Sakamoto, or Mishima.

"Are you planning on going?" Takamaki asks as soon as the final bell chimes out, Akira almost doesn't hear her over the sound and she starts to repeat her question before he works up the wits to respond.

Akira shakes his head, then shrugs, stacking notebooks into his schoolbag, then, more discreetly, Morgana as well.

"Y-yeah, I figured, boys are... yeah..."

He's not sure what to make of the statement, or if he's just not hearing it properly due to all the attention they seem to be gathering just from Takamaki talking in his direction.

"I think I might go."

Akira nods when she looks him in the eye.

"I've been feeling so anxious lately, you know? With this whole stalker thing and Shiho still recovering, I think talking about it might help or something."

He nods again. Something in his arm twitches, like it wants to reach out to her. And, when he thinks about it, he kind of does; he just doesn't know how.

"Besides, if I'm not at my best, our team will suffer and-" She doesn't say anything after that, not
for a long moment, "I just... don't want to let you down, or Ryuji. Which... sounds kind of stupid, since I've only just met you; but I know you're strong, and so is Ryuji, and Mona too... I just... I dunno."

Akira's head feels light and his chest is on fire, but he nods anyway when Takamaki looks back at him, studying him under a critical eye until she finally gathers her things and walks off.

Mishima approaches next, not waiting until Takamaki had fully left before the man is taking up her spot in front of him.

"Takamaki-chan, huh?" Mishima says with a smile and a blink of one eye, "She's cute." He adds on a moment later, though Akira has no idea why.

He shrugs, leaning back into his seat.

"A-anyways..." Mishima says, shrinking down into Takamaki's seat in front of him and turning around in like she had, "I was looking through the forums- and I updated the criteria with the names like you said- and I found an interesting case. A stalker! Can you believe that?"

The words makes him recoil.

If Akira were able to speak, he'd mention that the other boy looks almost pleased with the information; that the existence of a stalker pleased him in some way. But, as he was, Akira was unable to project such a thought, even when his fingers itched to do so. That itch died down when the other boy handed hi a piece of paper though, which he supposed was a good thing in consideration of what Mishima knew about the Phantom Thieves.

Unfolding the paper, he let his eyes scan over the printed out image of Mishima's website, a singular post took up the entire page. Sentence after sentence of concern about a deranged stalker following her to and from work, contacting her at strange times; Akira almost wondered if Ann had posted this and Mishima had somehow drawn the connection between the two.

A name was at the bottom.

**Nakanohara Natsuhiko.**

Below that was a phone number, written faintly in pencil.

"Do you think you can handle it?" Mishima asks once Akira folds the paper back down and shoves it into his own pocket.

He shrugs, if Nakanohara had a palace, or exited in Mementos, they'd be able to handle it, but Akira had no way of knowing that at the moment.

Mishima's expression falters, then recalibrates into another friendly smile, as if they weren't discussing illegal activity and stalkers, "Ah well, I tried my best, I'll keep looking for other cases that might need your guys' attention. A-and my phone number is on the bottom in case you want another suggestion or something, just don't text me before nine or my mom gets mad that I'm not studying, okay?"

Akira nods once again, then watches as Mishima bolts from the classroom.

"What a weird guy..." He hears Morgana mutter as he pulls out his phone.

"Mishima thinks he found a target."
"Yeah?" Comes Sakamoto's near-instant reply, right before he slides the classroom's door open with a call of his name.

Akira flinches at the first noise, but settles down by the time Ryuji crosses the empty classroom and climbs onto his desk; Morgana pounces out of the still open bag on the desk, narrowly avoiding being squished.

"So who is it?" Ryuji questions lowly, crossing his arms over his chest, "Saw Mishima skippin' down the hallway before I came in, lookin' pretty smug with himself."

Handing over the paper Mishima had handed to him, Akira does his best to gauge Ryuji's reaction as he reads over the forum post.

"You think this might be like, a set-up or somethin'?" Ryuji asks.

The question catches him off guard, actually; he hadn't considered the possibility at all really. Mishima already knew, or at least confirmed, that he was part of the Phantom Thieves.

**Why wouldn't he go to the principal or the police then?** Akira couldn't come up with a valid defense as to why Mishima would start a forum to try and help them, not one that he could fit on a dry-erase board or otherwise.

"If he already knew that we were the Phantom Thieves, why go through the trouble of setting us up instead of telling someone?" Morgana asks, all but voicing the thoughts he couldn't collect.

"Maybe he wanted proof?"

"It's not like anyone can see what we're doing in the MetaVerse, Ryuji."

Ryuji shrugs, then looks down at him.

Akira bites at his lip, another bad habit, trying to think through both sides of the argument and determining risk.

"Why don't we just see if this guy has a palace before we do anything?" Morgana suggests.

Nakanohara doesn't have a palace, but he does exist in Mementos.

"Lame... I thought we were goin' after a big shot, not some loser who can't take a hint." Ryuji comments with a sigh.

Morgana pulls himself up taller on the desk underneath them, "You guys are still new at this, think of it as some additional training. Besides, I thought you wanted to get rid of all the corrupted hearts, not just the big shots?"

Sakamoto scratches at his cheek, looking chastised before turning to him, "I guess but... You know what I'm talking about, right, Akira?"

He nods, despite being the contrary.

Sakamoto smiles anyway, unseeing or unwilling to notice his confusion, "Right on!"

Below them, Morgana sighs, crawling back into the schoolbag, "We should at least ask what Lady Ann thinks about this guy."

"On the forum? Or someone he knows?" Ann ends up asking once he, Sakamoto, and Morgana
are outside the school gates. Ryuji answers the question in his place, then the one after, and Takamaki agrees in not so many words before logging off.

"Tomorrow, then?" Ryuji ends up sending while saying it out loud.

Akira nods in assent, Sakamoto smiles back at him before they separate at the station, and Takamaki replies that evening while he's at the bathhouse and not looking at his phone.

The entrance to Nakanohara's budding palace is splintered between an arcing intersection that Akira almost misses the first time he drives through the bend, but the glowing entrance that curls the metal rails lining the floor calls his attention like a physical presence. Not dissimilar to the feeling he gets when Arsene is making himself known, and the sensation has him flicking his head to the side in time to see the portal just before he twists Morgana's wheel in the opposite direction. He guides the van through the warped train tracks silently and parks just inside of the entrance; a useless gesture since Morgana shifts back into his natural form without warning, sending the room into a bleak darkness without the presence of his teammate's headlights. Everything is an outline, except for the distinct glowing eyes floating in the middle of the room. He barely makes out the shape of them between the wrapping, rolling fog that further encases the figure in darkness.

Panther calls out her persona, who casts the room in an orange and red glow by raising her hand. The spark of fire in Carmen's hand flickers against Mementos' endless breeze, but allows them all to see the figure standing in the center of the room.

Nakanohara is so ordinary looking that Akira wonders if they'd managed to stumble into the wrong place, the man is standing under Carmen's glow appears unfazed by their entrance. Instead, the man tugs at the ends of the sleeves on his expensive looking suit and remains still otherwise; if it weren't for the glowing, malicious gleam in his eyes, barely concealed under a neat looking and well-kept bowl cut, and the menacing smirk that the man adopts, Akira would have considering turning around. The presence of those things made him want to run, instead, to get away from this man as quickly as his legs could carry him.

His legs wouldn't move, but his knees threatened to buckle.

Akira had never been good at reading people just from one look, but staring into the feral expression that Nakanohara had adopted, he knew, without a doubt, that this man was a danger to all of them; Takamaki worse than others, possibly.

Panther steps forward, the heels of her costume clacking noisily in the otherwise empty area, approaching the yellow-eyed man. Carmen follow just behind her, floating just over one shoulder, leaving the rest of them in the dark and casting more and more light on Nakanohara's snarling teeth. Morgana leaps forward as well, hastily stepping in front of Panther before she reaches their target.

"Who're you?" A voice calls out, gruff and snide; almost identical to how Kamoshida had first spoken to him and Ryuji when they'd been captured.

His legs move on his own, dragging him into the epicenter of Carmen's fire where the other three were already waiting.

"Are you that stalker?" Panther calls out, much louder than necessary.

Nakanohara doesn't react.

"Haven't you ever stopped to considered how your ex feels?" She tries instead, still loud enough
that her voice bounces off the walls, but not loud enough to drown out Nakahara's voice when he begins muttering.

"She's mine... Mine... Mine!"

"Hey!" The cement floor beneath them shivers with a loud crack, like glass suddenly exploding. Akira jumps, then glances over and around Carmen's skirt and Panther's form. Skull is crouched over, bright yellow hands extended outwards, still recoiling from having just smashed his pipe into the floor in front of him.

His brain stabs against his skull in rebellion and his heart threatens to hammer out of his chest; he'd thought he'd managed to get over this stupid fear.

"Can you quit yammering and quit stalking your ex, she dumped your ass, dude!" Skull calls out. Akira watches, half in terror and half in awe, as the blond pulls his pipe away from the floor, revealing a circular hole in the floor. Cracks splinter off from the impact, spraying plumes of dust into the air that sweep around Nakahara and print grey splotches onto his suit.

The man doesn't seem to take notice, only glares out at four of them with his glowing eyes and stamps his foot on the ground. "She's my property! I can do whatever I want with her!"

Panther recoils from the shadow, taking a step back, but Carmen's flame grows too bright for Akira to see what expression she's making.

"You're sick..." Nakahara laughs, a high-pitched cackling that sends another uncomfortable shiver down his spine.

"What?" The man asks, taking a step forward, "It's not like she didn't treat me like a plaything. What's wrong with me doing the same?"

Skull growls, "You can't treat someone like shit just 'cause they did something to you, you moron!"

Akira thinks of Kamoshida for an instant, wondering if Sakamoto would take a pipe to his legs if given the opportunity.

"We're gonna change the hearts of all the bastards like you." He promises.

"Like me?" Nakahara echoes, "There's millions of people worse than me, why am I being singled out? What about Madarame, huh? He stole everything from me! Where were you when that happened, huh? Answer me!"

He recoils at the name.

It couldn't be.

"What the hell..." Skull voices.

Nakahara shakes his head, then explodes into a black mist. His entire form falls to the ground like rain water and sits in a puddle on the cement floor before shooting upwards like an explosion. In a flicker of blackened fire, a shadow emerges from the onyx-tinted mess. It cackles maniacally at them and rushes through the air with a flap of its wings.

She barely manages to dodge a swipe of its claws as she falls towards the ground, and Carmen retaliates quickly, flicking orbs of flame in the shadow's direction. It manages to dodge each attack,
laughing out in a shrill voice as it does so.

Captain Kidd crowds the room in a flicker of flame, his boat nearly reaching from one of the corridor to the other as the skeletal captain aboard it bombards the air in front of them with a hail of bullets and spears of lighting that fork off several times before splattering towards the ground. The smell of gunpowder fills the air, thick and acrid with the smell of fire. Lances of lighting continue to spark against the ground, exploding the terrain in a hail of cement shrapnel create a cloud of dust that carries along on Memento's breeze.

The shadow emerges from the mess uninjured despite the chaos, though considerably darker than before now that it's covered in dust and flecks of dark cement.

Morgana calls out his persona with a heavy gale, blasting bursts of air towards the shadow with a flick of its blade; he cries out when the thing manages to dodge every attempt at hitting it.

In the middle of its taunting laugh, Panthers whip flickers through the air, barely visible when their light source keeps flashing from one end of the room to the other. The whip looks like it's about to connect, but the monster flips over Panther's arcing weapon and lands in the same spot it had been occupying before.

"Uh, dude?" Skull calls out over the maelstrom of cannon fire, explosions, and lighting. "Joker!"

Akira flinches at the call and looks towards his teammates, guilty that he'd just been standing there like an idiot.

Arsene bursts out of him, escaping from within without him feeling it. His persona laughs, deeply and surly, before collapsing his wings together, sending a black gust towards the shadow in front of them. It manages to dodge it, even with a blast of fire coming from another angle.

"Fucking stand still!" Skull calls out again, throwing his pipe at the dodging shadow. It evades once again, leaving the pipe to clatter against the far wall.

"Tricky one..." Arsene analyzes, flicking out a blackened fire of his own using only his finger tips.

"We need to slow him down somehow!" Morgana orders, attempting to nail Nakanohara's shadow with a splattering of marbles from his slingshot.

Akira gets an idea only after Arsene is sucked back into him, replaced by another tamed persona before he consciously thinks of doing so. Jack Frost appears in front of him, chilling the air around him instantly and somehow freezing the sweat that had been sliding down his forehead. Jack Frost stomps his foot on the ground and bright blue light dances across the floor, encompassing the entire floor in a flat expanse of ice.

The shadow jumps back in attempt to dodge his attack, but slips as soon as his feet touch the ground. The darkened monster slides backwards, flailing his arms in attempt to fix himself to no avail. Nakanohara's shadow crashes back into the far wall, its head meeting the textured concrete with a sickening crunch.

Akira hesitates for a second, then rushes forward, unaffected by the slippery texture on the floor somehow, and stops in front of the shadow with his gun out.

"You're all idiots!" It cries, thick trails of red flow down its face, dislodging the dust that had been building up from their combined attacks. "You all make me sick! She's mine to do as I want!"

He pulls the trigger.
Nakanohara's shadow explodes in a splash of gore. Akira thinks he's going to be sick, his stomach churning painfully before he can force himself to look away.

The real Nakanohara appears behind them, missing his smile and yellowed eyes, but trails of liquid are slithering down his face just like his shadow.

"Y-you were right about me..." He says without preamble, not looking at any of them, "I was wrong. I'm sorry, please forgive me. That evil teacher used me, then threw me onto the streets... That's when I met her..."

"Evil teacher?" Panther questions, stepping into the bright glow of Nakanohara's true form.

"Madarame... Madarame-sensei..." The guy snifflies, "I just didn't want to be thrown out again... alone again..."

Akira's gut squirms, uncomfortable.

Nakanohara steps forward, "You change hearts, right?"

"That's right..." Panther confirms.

The man drops to his knees in front of him, appearing humbled, "I- I beg of you... change Madarame's heart... B-before more people fall victim to him."

His glow, and form, disappear before any of them can answer. A small wallet and a silver necklace stacked on top of each other are what had remained of Nakanohara.

Akira picks them up, shoving both items into his pocket without looking at them.

"W-we should go..." Morgana urges, "Before this bud collapses."

They escape without another word, and Akira drives them back to the entrance of Mementos, avoiding any of the lingering shadows that were in their way. For once, he manages to be the first one out of the MetaVerse, and steps onto the platform without looking back. The exhaustion hits him like a solid force, weighing down on his bones like he's been filled with cement. He wobbles on his feet and considers sitting down, but thinks better of it while he waits for his teammates to reappear; it takes longer than expected and he wonders if he'd ran out as opposed to walking out like he thought.

Sakamoto is the first out, followed by Morgana and Takamaki. None of them look happy.

"That was..." Ann starts up, only to trail off.

"Uncomfortable?" Sakamoto finishes, dragging a hand through his hair, flecks of sweat bounce off of him and onto the floor.

"Yeah... kinda. I'm gonna go, but... good work I guess." Takamaki leaves with that, not saying goodbye or waving back at them.

"It takes some getting used to." Morgana ends up saying, his blue eyes are facing the crowd that Ann had disappeared into, "Phantom Thievery, I mean."

Akira shrugs one shoulder, nodding, knowing that Morgana wasn't looking up at him to see either.

"That was... kind of brutal, dude." Ryuji comments.
Akira looks up at the teammate, expecting the blond to be looking towards Morgana, but instead is surprised to find Ryuji's dark eyes locked onto him. He looks away before he can help it.

"Ann stopped me before we left, talkin' about how you kinda, ya know, shot that guy's shadow in the face..." Ryuji explains, "She got pretty freaked out, then left before I could say anything."

**Brutal?** If the shadow had been a person, he could understand, but shadows weren't people— from what Morgana had said—they were the hearts of people who were corrupted. Not to mention that it had freaked him out as well, just not to the extent that Takamaki had felt, apparently.

He ends up nodding in reply to the revelation, but doesn't pull his phone out to properly respond, unsure if he could actually manage to coordinate his fingers in such a way at the moment.

Ryuji nods too, Akira barely catches the bobbing of his chin as he does so.

"See ya."

Akira rides back to LeBlanc in silence, holding Morgana in his lap until they make it back to the cafe. Even then, he only slings his bag over his shoulder long enough to navigate through the cafe and into the attic before he's clutching the feline against his chest once again.

Victory tasted like gunpowder and smelled like blood.

*Was all of this still worth it?* He couldn't help but wonder.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

Hello again, sorry for the late update.  
Been very busy being an awful adult.  
Please leave a review, if you would. :)
When Akira wakes up the next morning to the sound of his alarm, he immediately considers rolling over and pretending that it was Sunday instead of Wednesday. Instead, he slings his feet over the edge of the bed and roots his feet on the attic's chilly floorboards, causing a shudder to trek up his spine and making him think of Nakanohara's shadow from the day before. Everything seems to remind of the MetaVerse lately, though he supposed it was better than being reminded of the world that wasn't strictly cognitive.

Akira hurries in getting downstairs and into his uniform, wondering if he'd be expelled on the spot for being late for a second time. As ridiculous as it is to think about, he can still feel his heart hammer with anxiety at the prospect; getting expelled for being late would almost be on par for normal recently.

His stomach cramps rhythmically as he passes Leblanc's kitchen for the second time, having had to return upstairs for his school bag- and Morgana- but he doesn't pause in walking towards the cafe's exit with the cat concealed under his shoulder.

Sakura-san doesn't stop him today. He thinks he should find it strange. He also supposes that he didn't really have time to question it, deciding instead, to remain grateful for the small mercy as he walks as quickly as he can to the train station, taking care to navigate with Morgana's safety in mind; as well as his own, though that was more secondary since his leg was still burning from falling into the street the previous week and his eyes had already started throbbing from behind his glasses from the stress.

From what he can tell, he's the last to arrive, and keeps his head down as he slides into his seat. Taking out his notes sounds like a thunderstorm and he feels like melting under the desk before anything more awkward can happen. Nobody stares in his direction though; when he takes a careful glance to his right, taking in his classmates reactions, he doesn't find any of their usual stares. He watches, transfixed, as each of his classmates flicks through notebooks. He can't help but hope that his notoriety was starting to fall back into the slump it had following Kamoshida's confession.

"I'm sure all of your other teachers have made you aware of this," Kawakami starts, pulling a stack of papers from her desk, along with a clipboard, "But mid-term testing begins today. And well... if you haven't been studying, then good luck to you."

Akira's heart sinks into stomach, along with every other organ in his body.

"I'd been hoping, in light of the recent developments, that we'd give all of you more time to process and prepare for your exams but..." She sighs, folding one arm over the other, "I'm just a teacher, so it's not really my place to say. Take one and pass the rest back."
Takamaki's hand holds over his shoulder, handing him a stack of papers without looking at him.

It takes him a minute to actually process what's happening, but he finally grasps the pile and slides one onto his desk before slowly offering the last one to the student behind him.

The room goes quiet after the shuffling of papers and Akira swipes his notes off of his desk and tries his best to maneuver them around Morgana, who's taking up most of the space inside his desk.

Despite the initial shock and suddenness of the situation, the test is pretty easy; his focus falls into place like the last piece of a puzzle being slapped together. Each of the questions were nearly word-for-word of things Kawakamki had gone over in class. The essays were more difficult, but at least there wasn't an oral examination.

He finishes the first half of the test ten minutes before lunch is supposed to start, and that time is spent, gratefully, resting his head on his desk and zoning out.

Morgana suggests the roof just before the next bell rings across the school, and Akira nods into the folds of his arms and sneaks Morgana back into his bag before stopping at the school store first; his stomach feels permanently clenched from stress and hunger and he doesn't stop to read any of the labels before pointing to one of the bins on the other side of the counter. The student looks at him for a moment and Akira almost apologizes for his offense but she offers him his total instead of saying anything else. He quickly pays and walks off, feeling slightly embarrassed, for whatever reason.

Before climbing past the third floor and onto the roof, he glances over his shoulders in both directions before climbing back up. Morgana leaps onto the ground with a crunch of stray leaves, something he hears rather than notices as he closes the door gently behind them. He follows his teammate after, though, letting the cat guide him to the edge of the imposing gate and sitting in front of it; the spot looks over part of the city and, if he were standing, part of the courtyard where Suzui had fallen.

Akira pulls half-squished food from his bag and starts dividing it up, contemplating if he should just start bringing Morgana's canned food with him to school. The rattling slam of the door is sudden enough that his extended hand jerks in place, sending Morgana's half onto the concrete between them, narrowly missing a small puddle from a curve in the roof. He's hesitant to pick it up, despite his luck, and offers Morgana the other half of the mystery meal before turning towards the source of the noise while his chest constricts painfully. He'd been near certain that nobody had seen him sneak up here.

"Yo." Sakamoto calls, halfway to where he and Morgana are sitting despite the obvious limp that encumbers the man's speed.

The blond hisses as he sits down, kicking his legs out and letting out a airy sigh as he leans against the gate that circles the roof; Akira thinks of the trains at the station when he does this.

"Whaddya got?" Ryuji ends up asking as he pulls items from his school blazer's pockets and putting them to one side of him.

"The sign said it was an... apple something? I couldn't really see it." Morgana ends up answering for them, "It's got bread in it."

"Wednesday's apple day." Ryuji says in way of reply, "Those are pretty shitty, but Ann used to get 'em everyday back in middle school. Like clockwork, ya know?"
Akira can't help but wonder, folding one of the wrappers and sticking into his unzipped bag.

Akira doesn't know, but when Ryuji stares at him for a long moment, he bobs his head like he understands.

"She used to be chubby, too." He continues, grabbing at his own stomach, "Not like, big big, but she definitely had a gut."

"R-really?" Morgana whispers, then pulls himself upwards with a tilt of his chin and a scoff, "I- I mean, you should never talk about a lady's weight! It's ungentlemanly to do so."

"Yeah, whatever." Is all Ryuji says in reply, popping open the tab on a can and taking a sip of whatever's inside. "Were you a fat kid, Akira?"

Akira blinks, and feels his fingers climbing into his hair before he can stop them.

He shrugs in answer, not really sure where he'd fall, exactly, on that scale. He's still coming to the slow-realization that not all upbringings were quite like his own, even if he and his teammates shared similar experiences.

"Figures. You look like a coupla twigs taped together." Ryuji smiles, "I'm kinda jealous, ever since I stopped runnin', I been gaining weight ever since. But since we're, ya know, phantom thieves now, I figure now's the best time to get back into shape."

Akira nods quietly.

"An' there's this gym that's been opened up in Shibuya since like, last month, wanna check it out sometime?"

Morgana pipes up before Akira can consider a response.

"Training would be good for the mind and the body. And I need to keep in shape for when I get my real body back..."

Ryuji snorts, sending a spray of crumbs onto his uniform. "I don't think they allow cats in the gym."

"I am not a cat!" Morgana snaps back, also sending a small spray of crumbs onto the floor, along with a small piece of apple. "Besides, don't you think we should be looking for our next target instead of trying to become a meat-headed thug?"

"Oh yeah!" Sakamoto's eyes widen, "I been lookin' around on the forum and on the 'net, but there's no teachers named Madarame mentioned at all."

Morgana wilts a bit, his posture sinking until he's almost curled in on himself, "That is strange."

"You think that guy was legit? I mean, he was a shadow after all."

Akira remains quiet, not offering a reply when the blond glances in his direction.

"He seemed sincere, though, even after you all defeated his shadow." Morgana speculates.

Ryuji shrugs one shoulder. Some of the crumbs that had been occupying his uniform tumble onto the concrete in a messy cascade. The blond doesn't seem to notice, and cocks one hand into the air as he starts jumps back into the conversation.
"I guess so... As much as I hate to say it, though, we should probably wait until after this week before we group up and find this guy." Ryuji groans, then mutters, "Tests are such a pain in the ass..."

Morgana nods, and Akira inclines his own head in agreement.

"Just remember that phantom thieves are strong in mind and in body, Ryuji." The cat advises.

Ryuji groans again, throwing his head back until the spikes slap through the small openings in the gate and making it rattle, "I know, I know. Now you sound like my ma. 'Sides, if my grades started improving so suddenly, wouldn't that be even more suspicious?" He questions, leaning to the side until he's staring at the two of them.

Akira shrugs.

The blond snorts, "Guess I better go, then, study up for the other half and bullshit my way through the essay questions."

He cringes, but waves his teammate off regardless.

"Good luck, Ryuji!" Morgana offers as the door to the roof slams shut again, leaving the two of them alone.

"Do you think this Madarame thing is a real lead, Joker?" Morgana questions after a moment of staring off into the city-scape.

Akira shrugs, thumbing his phone out of his pocket for the first time that day, "I'm not sure."

"I guess so..." Morgana supplies, "It's just... you never really say anything with Ryuji or with Lady Ann, and it's been making me wonder if you're really serious about leading the Phantom Thieves, is all." His voice comes out quiet, barely above the croak of city life, but heavy and intense like a rock threatening to crush him as he strains to listen.

"I can't say anything."

Morgana groans, high-pitched in comparisons to the noises that Ryuji had made moments ago. "That's not what I mean! It's just... you're not... leader-like!"

_Morgana's right..._ Akira could acquit to that; before Tokyo, before the trial, he'd never had to speak to anybody as often as he did Sakamoto or Takamaki. Now he was leading their group into dangerous situations. He didn't really contribute to their plans at all, he just... did what he could, contributed what little he had to offer.

Which wasn't much.

"Should someone else be leader, then?" He asks, more than willing to take orders from someone who can actually give them.

Morgana wilts again and turns away from him to stare out at the empty roof around them. Akira has to lean even closer to hear what he says next.

"I didn't mean it like that, Joker, but you need to... be more involved. The MetaVerse and Mementos are life-threatening, if something happens to Ryuji or Lady Ann and me, and you're not strong enough or committed enough, we might all..."
The threat— the truth— lingers in the air like dense fog and it becomes a struggle to breathe properly. He's reminded of the things that Igor had said, about avoiding ruin and being determined to maintain his contracts. He should be more involved with the Phantom Thieves, he just doesn't know how to do that, or how to lead them to their salvation.

"An unfair burden, indeed." Arsene says from within, "Yet, I sense your resolve, even if you, yourself, are blind to it...

Morgana doesn't say anything else while he climbs back into the bag. Akira takes it for the end of the conversation and scoops him up, along with some of the wrappers that Ryuji had left behind from his lunch. He guides the two of them back to the second floor and maneuvers Morgana back into his desk while the second half of their mid-term is passed out right after the next bell rings.

The second half of Kawakami's test isn't difficult, following along with her lectures and the assigned readings. Akira knows this, and has studied the material several times over, yet he finds it strangely, almost unnaturally, difficult to concentrate at narrowing his thoughts down to those that are purely academic; even more so to pick up his pencil and write more than his name. He can't help but letting his mind wander off, creating trails upon trails of potential futures—of the ruin that Igor, Coraline, and Justine spoke of; ones where he fails to find an answer, can't muster up the strength, or the magic, or the right persona to deal with the next threat. Being forced to watch as it's Skull or Panther that takes the sharp end of a spear instead of himself, a future where shadows are the ones pointing guns to their heads while they beg for forgiveness. The imaginings make him sick to his stomach with worry and anxiety.

He has to be a better leader, but knowing what to do and how to do it are so different.

Akira hates his own incompetency, his own dependence on others to guide and care for him; if it hadn't been for Sakamoto and Morgana, he'd most likely be dead once he'd stumbled into Kamoshida's palace.

A chill runs up his spine at that, releasing him from the chains of his thoughts but leaving behind the dread and chill that they'd created. He chances a look at the clock hanging on the far end of the room and almost starts panicking all over again. Another sort of a ruin would come if he didn't finish this test.

Working through the test is almost like becoming another person; he's focused solely on the packet of papers under him and he finishes them without straining for the lost information. Once it's completed, however, he finds himself unusually jittery. His leg is bouncing under his desk, then the other. He's almost tempted to stand up and walk out just to rid himself of this energy, but remembers that there's an entire week's worth of tests that he has to sit through. The self-reminder doesn't help any with his bouncing leg.

The classroom erupts into chatter as soon as all the tests are collected and Akira almost feels like joining them; a first for him, as far as he can tell. He glances up, straight towards Takamaki and falters, recalling what Sakamoto had said outside of Mementos. Cheer dying, he sinks back into his seat and waits for their class to be dismissed.

Walking to the station is an uncomfortable burden when school ends, knowing that two of his three teammates don't want to talk to him; even more so when he lives with one of those two. The whistle and huff of the trains, along with the hum of passengers walking past, is enough to draw him back into his mind. It feels almost surreal, this isolation, though it truly wasn't any different than when he was back home.

The tap on his shoulder makes him jump, and when he turns around to see who it is he jumps
again, having expected Sakamoto or Takamaki, or even Mishima.

This person is neither of those three, but shares the same uniform that he does.

"You're friends with Takamaki Ann, right?" She questions, voice hard and authoritarian; her question is more of a statement and the tactic reminds him of dealings with his own parents and puts him on guard faster than he can react.

"We're classmates." He signs, because they're not on school grounds and hopefully his lack of verbal skills will make this conversation end sooner.

"Uh, I-I mean, you can just shake your head yes or no, understand?" She continues, recovering quickly.

He inclines his head, half-curious and more than half-cautious of the situation; Morgana squirms against his side and Akira can tell he's probably eavesdropping again.

"You're Kurusu-kun from Class 2-D, correct?"

He nods, letting his gaze drop away from the woman; she's starting to remind him of the lawyers and cops that had shown up during his trial. That connection was starting to make him sweat, despite how unlikely it was that this person was either of those things.

"That makes you classmates with Takamaki Ann, right?"

Again, he nods.

"Are you friends with her?"

Akira hesitates.

"You sit behind her, right? There's reports of you two talking to each other during class."

Reports? He questions, nodding once again.

"Are you friends with Takamaki Ann, then?" She questions again, sweeping brown fringe away from her too intense eyes.

Akira looks away, losing a hand in his own hair at the line of questioning.

Who... is this person? He shrugs noncommittally.

"I'll take that as a no then." The girl in front of him says, pulling out a small notepad along with a pen, "Have you noticed anything strange about her, then? Notes or texts to mysterious numbers?"

He shakes his head.

"Has she been acting secretive lately? Or suspicious at all?"

He shakes his head without thinking about it; he doesn't really know any of this stuff and knows even less why this stranger is asking him instead of Takamaki herself.

"Interesting... That will be all then, Kurusu-kun, the student council appreciates your cooperation."

Cooperation...?
Something clicks and Akira drags his gaze away from the station's tiled floor and up this strange girl; he takes in her neatly made uniform and equally neat hair. Nothing about her is out of the ordinary, nor is she extremely ordinary. Something about her presence, though, throws him off. The air around her is domineering despite her status as a student. If she hadn't approached him, hadn't started asking questions, he probably would have never noticed her; yet she had done those things, no doubt knowing who he was and his apparent relationship with Takamaki.

*Is this the stalker?* He questions, almost frantic.

"Good luck on the rest of your mid-terms, Kurusu-kun. I hope the extraneous circumstances that have caused your transfer aren't hindering your academics." The stranger says, turning on one foot and walking in the opposite direction. Akira catches her navigating back up the stairs and exiting the station through the sea of passengers. Clearly the woman had no business here, and the realization that she had followed him down here just to talk about Ann made him freeze up inside.

As soon as the next train headed towards Yongen pulls up, he's worming his way through the crowd and sitting on one of the seats. His legs are bouncing noisily against the floor while he scratches at his scalp. He's stressed all over again; over-loaded with questions and sensations.

"Shouldn't you tell Lady Ann about that woman?" Morgana asks from where he's sitting on Akira's lap, the visible part of him is bouncing like waves where his legs can't stop jerking.

He nods, tugging his phone out of his pocket and wiping his clammy palms against his uniform.

"*Someone from our school just approached me in the station.*" Akira sends to their group chat once the train's doors slide shut. Being away from Shibuya seemed like the best thing to do at the moment, lest another, more dangerous, person started asking questions about his teammate.

"*And?*" Sakamoto ends up asking.

*Oh right.*

"*She was asking about Takamaki.*" He shoots back, stepping onto the platform into Yongen-Jaya.

"*Ann?*"

"*Me?*" Ann pipes up, logging in and responding at the call of her name.

"*Yes.*" He sends back, because he can't really think of anything else.

"*What did they look like?*" Ann asks next.

Akira tries to sum up the person, but is having difficulty doing so.

"*You think they're the stalker?*" Ryuji interjects.

"*Brown hair.*" He finally sends off, because he remembers that much.

"*That ain't very helpful, dude.*"

Morgana slides his head out from the bag on his lap and glances down at the sideways screen in his hands.

"Didn't she say she was student council at your school?"
"Did she?" Akira questions, trying- and failing- to recall the one-sided conversation that had just happened; to him no less.

"She said she was part of the student council."

"What! Forreal?"

"There's only one girl on that group, though." Ann responds.

Akira drops his phone into the pocket of his school blazer. His heart is hammering against his chest and when he nods to Sakura-san as he's walking past a wave of nausea floats through him. It passes quickly though, like a single gust of air floating past him. Depositing his schoolbag onto the mattress and toeing off his shoes, he climbs into bed anyway.

"You mean Niijima-senpai? The president? Why would she be stalking you? " Ryuji questions.

"I don't know, Ryuji. I just know that someone has been following me around when I'm going to work or school. You don't think it's because of what we did to Kamoshida, do you?"

Akira doesn't know, but since none of them do, he figures that probably wouldn't be helpful to say.

"Didn't Morgana say that nobody would know it was us, though?" Sakamoto points out.

"True, but he also called the three of us out at the assembly, remember? Wouldn't that make us look guilty of it. Plus the rumors that have been going around about us anyway."

"Weren't they sayin that it was Akira and me doin' that though? I don't remember anyone talking about you at all."

"Yeah, but the three of us hang out all the time, so maybe one of our teachers think that we did it..."

"I guess."

Morgana climbs up beside him, finally managing to claw his way out of the bag, and stares down at the screen in his hands once again. The cat merely sighs, contributing nothing else. Akira gets the feeling that this is one of the situations that he'd been talking about earlier, about how he needed to step up as their leader. He scanned his brain for options.

"We should avoid being around each other." He types out, sending it and glancing towards Morgana right after; Akira can't tell what the other is thinking, though.

"Like, pretend we aren't friends?" Ryuji asks.

"That makes sense, actually." Ann says after a terse silence; Morgana still doesn't say anything, nor does the cat look up at him, "We can't get caught while we're changing their hearts, but if we're together all the time in real life, especially since people were already suspicious of all three of us, people will definitely start connecting the lines."

Morgana nods his head along with the message.

He'd been the one to suggest it, but something about the way Takamaki had put it made it make
more sense; Akira was inclined to agree.

"Seems kinda shitty though." Ryuji rebukes.

"Better than being expelled, though. Right?" Ann contends.

"I guess so, 'specially after all doing all these stupid tests."

"Well then, I guess you better start studying."

Takamaki logs off.

Ryuji doesn't say anything for a long time, and Akira puts his phone down, letting his head sink back into his pillow. The crushing feeling in his chest had dulled to a distant ache; they've worked out a plan that seemed like it was going to work. The logistics seemed sound, though, from previous experience, logic played little part in the real world.

Or the in the MetaVerse... He amends, tugging off his glasses and folding them up.

Akira wakes up to the sound of rain. Fortunately enough, the window had been shut at some point during the day and he can't quite recall if he'd done it that morning or the night before, or if he'd done it at all. He glances outside, careful not to adjust too quickly against the purring weight pressing down on his chest. It's not quite dark outside and he can still see parts of the sun bleeding through the spring's rain clouds and the tall buildings that breach through the skyline.

It's pretty. He comments to himself, and possibly the several, still-sentient beings inside of him.

Morgana shifts on top of him, and, gently as possible, Akira scoots the cat off of him until his roommate is lying down on the mattress instead of on top of him. Pulling his glasses back on, Akira flips his legs over the side of the bed and stands back up. His back and legs crack noisily as he does this, releasing pops that echo off the walls enclosing the mattress. When he glances back, he expects to find Morgana wide awake, but is surprised to find the other still curled up on the bed, now occupying the space that he had previously. He takes the freedom of being alone to change back into a different set of clothes; shirt, jacket, jeans, and, after a second thought, another pair of socks. All of them are comfortable and mostly-soft, but definitely lacking the pungent starchy smell that lingers on his school uniform. They are chilly though, from having sat in the cold attic all day.

LeBlanc is still open when he steps downstairs, which he finds surprising considering the lack of customers. The silence had made his descent noticeable, he figures, since Sakura-san was waiting at the counter and staring at him as soon as he turns the corner. Being thrust into the situation makes him jump a little.

"You hungry?" Sakura-san asks, motioning him forward with a dish towel.

Akira bobs his head on reflex, but as he sits down at the bar he realizes that he is feeling quite hungry. Shame licks at his insides, squirming under his skin. He digs into the meal that much more fervently when it's set down in front of him though, knowing that Takemi would end up getting Sakura-san involved otherwise.

He's halfway through the mountain of rice before his caretaker says something else.

"Hey, you still got the key for this place?"

He looks up, surprised at the question before inclining his head, knowing, with near-certainty, that
the small golden key was upstairs. It was piled with the card to the bathhouse that Sakura-san had also given him.

"Why don't you head out then? Being locked up all the time isn't the way for a young man to live." His caretaker suggests. A small smile is creeping around one end of a cigarette, though it takes him a moment to recognize it for what it is. "You'll only be here for a year, ya know, might as well make the most of it. Country bumpkins wanna see the sights just like everyone else, right?"

He nods, again, despite himself. If he's being honest, he's lost track of the conversation rather quickly.

"Just," Sakura-san continues, his small smile quickly shifting into a subtle frown. Akira glances away, fighting the urge to shrink down into the bar stool. "Don't get into any trouble. And don't miss the last train. Got it?"

Akira nods, then Sakura-san is stepping around the side of the counter and headed towards the exit.

"Oh, and don't forget to wash the dishes before you go."

Akira glances towards the sink, eyes the near-massive pile of dishes filling it up and quickly turns back towards Sakura-san had left. The door rings noisily as the man makes his exit, leaving him alone in the cafe.

Washing the dishes isn't that difficult, none of the items served at the cafe seem to stick to anything and he's made a large pile of clean plates and cups in a shorter time than it's taken him to work through the rest of his dinner. The meal, he admits, had energized him enough to work through the chore without any issues. He didn't feel tired, or even the need to sit down, no sudden vomiting or fainting. He felt pretty decent, if he was being honest, and that carried him through the workload he'd been left with.

He heads back upstairs with pruned hands and contemplates if he should wake Morgana or not; if he should bother leaving at all, in fact. But when he approaches the bed, and catches a glimpse of the medicine jars under his bed, he doesn't do either. Riding on his mood, he uncaps some of the mint-smelling jars and wipes the burning salve over the ridges of his spine and ribs. There's even an anti-septic in the box that Sakura-san had delivered to him the other day and he spends a few minutes letting it burn into the scrape along his leg.

The multi-vitamins, much like the other medicines Takemi makes, smell- and taste- like mint. But he swallows them down, doing his best to ignore the sense of dread that's threatening the monotony of being alone.

He pulls out the paper bag afterwards, swiping aside empty boxes of model guns and latching onto it.

It still scares him, how real it looks, what this thing could do if he were discovered with it; but he decides that since he'd already gotten Sakura-san's permission to leave, he may as well do what he can with his new freedom before another beam of suspicion is cast down on him.

With the bag in his hands, Akira finds that there's nothing else he can really do to delay his next decisions; other than attempting to de-dust the attic again, which, when he glanced down at the floor and over at the work desk he'd cleaned up, seemed to be a battle not worth tackling. He supposed he could do laundry or study for tomorrow's test- or any of the tests later in the week- but, without knowing which one would come next, he figured it'd be more detrimental than useful. It left him with one choice, of course, which was to wake Morgana, who was still resting even as
Akira lingered over him. He watched, for a long moment, at the slow, steady rise of his roommate's chest and couldn't help but let his curiosity spark. Cycling through his- admittedly spotty- memories, Akira's pretty sure he's never caught Morgana sleeping before him before.

It has been pretty stressful lately... He contends with himself. In reality, though, he was no idea who or what Morgana was before he'd ran into the monster-like being that had been locked in Kamoshida's basement. If anything concerning the Phantom Thieves or being trapped in the wrong body concerned him, Morgana concealed it very well.

Akira reaches over, clasping his fingers around the handles on his school bag and pulls it away from the mess of blankets and stray cat limbs and shoves the paper bag inside before shouldering the load, unconsciously anticipating a sudden dip to one side, but finding none; it was a strange sensation.

Before he leaves, Akira makes sure to empty out Morgana's litter box and leaves out a small plate of food for him, hoping that Sakura-san doesn't mind him borrowing one for the night. He had been the one to clean them, after all.

Taking the first train out of Yongen-Jaya, Akira finds it difficult to step further into the small alley that leads to Untouchables. Behind him, the entrance to the Velvet Room remains quiet, as stagnant as the alleyway around him. Akira paces backwards again, wondering if it was really in his best interest to leave Morgana at home while he did this, or if it was okay for him to be doing this at all.

He did say next week... He reminds himself, trying to rationalize. Though it had been nearly two weeks since he'd last been even near the place.

It takes him another ten minutes to get in front of the door to the shop, and a few heavy breaths before he manages to operate the door handle with his shaking fingers. Without Morgana's near-constant weight bearing down on him, he feels like might float away at any second, leading him to wonder when he'd even grown used to having his body half tilted in one direction.

A bell rings above him when he steps inside, similar enough to LeBlanc that he almost forgets why he's there until the man behind the counter shifts in his chair and glares straight at him.

"Oh, it's you." The same man from last time says, a thin white stick sticking out of one corner of his mouth. Just like last time. "You bring that special item back?"

Special item... Akira echoes inwardly, letting the words roll around his brain for a moment as he pulls the paper bag out from where Morgana's body would usually be.

"You didn't open it, did you?" The guy asks, finally standing up. He's- unsurprisingly- taller than him and Akira has to tilt his head back to stare in the general direction of his face.

"You didn't open it, did you?" The guy asks, finally standing up. He's- unsurprisingly- taller than him and Akira has to tilt his head back to stare in the general direction of his face.

Akira nods, feeling guilty and nervous, especially when the guy continues to stare down at him; his gaze feels like cement, rooting him in place. Not all that dissimilar to the way that Sakura-san does it, though the implications are much less pleasant than jail or violating his probation. Something about this man's presence reeks of danger. Akira, for the life of him, can't figure out what it is; other than being surrounded by weapons. It's almost like he's in the MetaVerse, sensing the omnipresent danger that has his skin crawling.

The clerk sighs, "Kids are so damn curious."

Akira stares down at the floor, at the small leaves and rocks that other customers must have brought in when they stepped inside.
He wants to leave.

"I gotta admit, though." The guy says over the long-since familiar sound of the paper bag unfolding. Akira keeps his eyes level with the ground, but can't help himself from glancing upwards as the clerk pulls the model gun out into plain view. "The way you dodged those suits was pretty impressive, they didn't even look twice at you." He laughs or coughs, Akira can't really tell. "I guess that's something about you, glasses, people don't even look twice at you. Know a lotta people that'd kill to be like that. Under that, though, ya got some steel ones; comin' in here, tryna pawn stuff off and ditchin' with evidence. Any kid I know woulda been cryin, or in jail..."

The words linger like a threat, like being thrown so suddenly back in time, before Tokyo, before spring, and right into the trial. He feels like throwing up, but keeps nodding. The man behind the counter was wrong about him, and so was Morgana; he wasn't brave, and he wasn't a leader.

"... And you're quiet. I bet you've never even been scolded in your life, huh?" The guy asks.

Akira hesitates, then shrugs, unsure if playing along or lying would be worse for him.

"Ah, well. I sold that medal if that's what you're worried about." He hadn't been, not really. He'd spent more time worrying about Sakura-san, or anyone else, finding about the model he'd been hiding.

The guy is quiet for a while, the only sound in the shop are the ones that come from the clerk fiddling with the model gun that Akira had just returned. That and his own insanely loud heartbeat, though he hopes that he's the only one hearing the latter.

"You ever find something like that again, bring it here, alright? I'll cut you a deal, no questions asked, got it?" The proposition almost sounds like a rule and Akira's bobbing his head into his chest before the words even finish coming out of the clerk's mouth.

"In return..." The guy continues, "I'll cook you up a special menu, I'll put aside a few units from each shipment just for you. Maybe if you bring something real nice, I'll chop off a discount or somethin', how's that sound?"

Akira nods again, feeling light-headed and overloaded. His ears are ringing and he resists sealing his hands over them while the clerk continues talking over at him.

"Name's Iwai, by the way." Akira catches his gloved fingers lifting up over the counter and signing it out for him. His chest tightens painfully.

"Iwai." He mirrors back, feeling happy for finally meeting someone whom he can talk to, but feeling equally as shameful for harboring such joy for something so stupid, so minuscule.

"Don't wear it out." Iwai warns him, though Akira catches him smiling around the stick in his mouth. The smile does nothing to remove the dangerous presence the guy seems to carry with him.

"You gotta name, glasses?" Iwai questions, picking up a small screwdriver from the counter before sitting back down.

"Kurusu Akira." He all but throws out once Iwai looks up from the model.

Iwai's face goes blank, "Slow down, kid, I ain't an expert in this stuff..."

Akira nods, letting his name spill out of his fingers, deliberately slow like they had been when he was teaching his teammates the same thing.
"Akira. That right?" He nods once more, not bothering to contain the tugging of a smile stretching out over his face, even as his face burns at the use of his given name. He's almost certain that it was a city-thing at this point, to just use them without provocation. It felt unbelievably good, though, to be understood like this; no hiding behind a screen, no dry-erase board or notepads. Just him.

"Pick up one of them cards, will ya?" Iwai suggests, or demands; he can't really tell which. A screwdriver points him towards a small display stand with a stack of business cards right next to the door. The card stock is firm in his fingers and reflects the overhead lights with its gloss.

**Untouchable.** It reads in the same bright neon that the sign just outside has, along with Iwai's name, declaring him as the owner. His contact information is just below that.

"Text me your name when you can, and I'll shoot back when I got somethin' new in stock for ya."

Akira nods to himself, pocketing the card in the wallet that Nakanohara's shadow had dropped. "You should probably go, anyways, unnoticeable or not, it's still a school night."

Akira nods at the statement, bowing a goodbye before walking out of the alleyway, feeling much better about the situation now than when it had started.

He steps out of the alley that leads to Iwai's shop and is bombarded with noise and light; a stark contrast to what had been a private, yet happy moment for him. He couldn't help but wonder how none of the sound from Shibuya managed to pierce into the shop, though. He figured it could've been his nerves about the situation blocking out things that would have stressed him out even worse, but he wasn't entirely sure.

He buys Morgana some more food, using half of the money that had been in Nakanohara's wallet, and heads back to Yongen-Jaya with a heavy plastic back hanging under his shoulder. The weight almost perfectly resembles that of Morgana's, enough so that he's pretty content to stand on the train as it brings him back to LeBlanc.

Morgana is still sleeping when he steps back into the attic, and Akira does his best not to bother him as he sets down his stuff and grabs some clothes to sleep in.

After washing up, he returns back to the cafe and isn't surprised to find Morgana still curled up in the sheets, clutching one corner of it between both sets of paws. Akira tries his best to get into bed without jostling him too much.

Without the bag under his bed, Akira feels like he's floating. Sleep collapses around him without him startling awake to crawl underneath the mattress. It's such a relief in pressure that it feels almost surreal, like he's forgotten something.

Chapter End Notes

As usual, sorry for the late update. Been busy with terrible adult stuff. I might upload a second chapter this week, but we'll really have to see. Please leave a review if you should feel so inclined, I'd really appreciate it. :)
Chapter 22

His alarm doesn't wake him up the next morning, startling him into consciousness. Nor does the acrid smell of brewing coffee and cooking curry make his stomach clench so suddenly, so painfully that he comes to. In fact, he doesn't feel hungry at all when a physical touch jerks his body into alertness like a bolt of lightning flowing through him; it's an odd comparison, yet fitting, now that he knows what it feels like. His stomach tenses, flinging his upper body into a sitting position on the mattress. From what he can tell, he's still in LeBlanc, still in Tokyo with the rain pelting down against the attic's single window. A shadow flashes past his field a vision, a blur of black that arcs to the other side of the room with a yelp.

Akira knows that he isn't the one to make the sound, and doubts that Sakura-san would either.

"What the-" Morgana's voice calls from where the shadow had been flung. He starts to think that the two might be the same, and is able to mostly confirm that suspicion when his teammate turned roommate jumps onto the edge of the bed with a sour expression.

"What was that for?" Morgana demands of him, so directly and with such authority that Akira finds himself at a loss for words.

His hands linger in the air between them for a tense moment, his heart hammering against his chest in a still present panic, before he realizes that Morgana doesn't know any sign; that nobody he knows does. Reaching over the edge of the bed, he pulls his phone from the charger and opens a text message.

"Why were you touching my face?" He questions in return, not bothering to apologize even though he recognizes that he probably should.

"I-I did no such thing!" Morgana splutters back at him, still yelling. The oceans that make up his eyes are narrowed, and his posture speaks of potential violence; Akira's reminded of their encounter with the strange gate within Mementos, and that Morgana, much like Ryuji, was capable of great violence. He scoots backwards, leaning against the attic's chilly wall and lets that cold seep into him. Trapping himself shouldn't feel relaxing, yet some part of him recognizes that he could probably take Morgana on in this form, even if he really didn't want to test that claim.

Morgana remains still, a statue carved in dark black fur, he barely recognizes the shape of his teammate in the attic's own darkness, with the light peering in through the cafe as the thing keep Morgana from completely blending into the otherwise shadowed attic. He's not sure what to make of any of this, or how he's supposed to react, but there's isn't much time for questions or the answers they might bring. Folding the sheet off of him, Akira heads to the other side of the LeBlanc's attic to gather his uniform and heads downstairs to change; with Morgana awake, he
does't really have the luxury of changing where he can't see himself, but figures it'd be for the best since he'd be heading there anyways.

Brushing his teeth with one hand and attempting to tame his hair with the other, Akira steps into his uniform pants and secures them tightly with the black leather belt that came with it, using the furthest ring kept them mostly secure on his waist. Once his mouth feels mostly clean, no longer tasted of bitter fear or panic, he gives up on the hair, letting it remain the mess that it always seems to shape into, he tugs on the shirt and school blazer and swiftly buttons them until he's dressed; like this, he looks like any other school student, though perhaps shorter or more depressing to look at. The glasses completed that look, even if they irritated his ear sometimes.

Sakura-san, for the second day in a row, doesn't stop him on his way out, even when Akira makes a point to leave a few minutes earlier just in case his caretaker might call him back like he'd been taking a habit of doing.

Maybe he forgot I exist. Part of him thinks or maybe hopes as he steps onto the mostly empty train, making sure to keep his umbrella within his own space by mimicking the person next to him.

The school-day starts off with much less surprise than the previous one had, he wished the same could be said for how anxious he is or how sweaty his hands get when the tests are passed backwards. Takamaki doesn't look at him either, which makes him question if she was following his suggestion or if she was still, as Sakamoto had put it, upset with him regarding Nakanohara. Fortunately, that question didn't linger for long, not when he started reading the questions on the mid-term, they distracted him for a few hours, until lunch was in session, but after getting lunch for him and Morgana, he had no distractions and almost an hour to think about it.

The two of them were sitting under the lip of the roof's entrance, just outside of the cascade from above, but not completely safe as it splashed down onto the ground all around them in a roar of static as he pondered his stupid question. He knew he could just ask, text Takamaki or send her a note, but couldn't bring himself to do it, not while he was rationing out half of his meal to Morgana or in the moments after while he chewed it into mush, completely lost in thought.

The roof's door didn't creak open and slam shut that day, nor in the rainy days that carried through the week of testing. Akira knew he shouldn't be surprised, but couldn't help but feel lonely; given how long he'd been isolated from the people around him, he's really surprised to realize that he enjoyed having people to sit with, to do things with, even if he was always on the outside of that. In all likelihood, his small group was bound apart before he'd really become a part of it. Ryuji and Ann had each other, after all, and Morgana was just with him- using them- until he got his body back. Then he'd be alone again, until he went back home, where Tokyo, and the people in it, would become a strange dream.

"Don't you ever clean this thing out?" Morgana asks on Saturday. It's the last day of mid-terms and he supposes he should be cheerful, but the rain, as calming as it is, has seemed to have dragged him into a spiral.

Akira glances over at his teammate, who's causing a small commotion as he pulls himself away from the bag he's all but claimed as his own. The cat pulls himself, along with a few balled up pieces of paper, and a few of the small plastic bags that the store downstairs uses to hold the food the sell. One of them is sticking off of Morgana's back, caught up in his fur and refusing to release even as the cat shakes himself wildly. Plucking the plastic away, Akira balls it up in his hand and gathers the other things that Morgana had pulled out before they can get wet and stuffs them back into the bag.

I should do that... He concedes, pushing hard onto the wrappers to force them into a manageable
nest for Morgana to sit on top of. The pile crinkles noisily when he does this, drawing Morgana's attention from whatever he'd been staring at.

"See!" The cat all but yells, making him glad, not for the first time, that only a few people could actually hear what he was saying, "A phantom thief should always keep their tools organized. Not to mention, I'm stuck in there all day!"

Through the exaggeration, Akira could see his point. LeBlanc's attic had been very much the same way before he and Morgana had sat down and cleaned it. With his school bag being a fraction of the size, it wouldn't take nearly as long. Or he hoped, at least.

After lunch, Hiruta-sensei walks down each of the aisles, handing them each of them a test personally. He finds the whole ordeal strange, but doesn't bother trying to reason out the change in routine as he jots his name down. Like the previous tests throughout the week, none of the questions are particularly difficult, but with this test in particular being over biology, it takes him longer than he'd done on the previous tests; being one of the last few people still leaning over the tests made him a little nervous, but he filtered through each question without difficulty and Hiruta-sensei dismisses all of them with an elegant wave, telling them to enjoy their youth over the weekend.

Packing up his bag, and Morgana, Akira heads towards the station and climbs into the attic without bothering Sakura-san. He sets his phone down on the table beside the railing and, once Morgana is safely deposited onto the floor, Akira dumps the contents of his bag onto the table. The balled up sheets of paper and plastic wrappers from the pile are a still damp from falling onto the damn floor and splash flecks of water onto the table as they fall onto the table. The dry-erase board clatters onto the tabletop and startles him, and he shoves it aside, half-annoyed with it just on principle. His notebooks, thankfully dry, are placed in a small pile on one end of the table and he's left with a small stack of papers, Nakanohara's wallet, as well as the silver necklace that had dropped along side it.

Plucking up the last item, Akira examines the necklace, holding it towards the attic's only light source. It gleams like any of the weapons they use in the MetaVerse, glowing brightly under the single light bulb in the shape of a silver heart. It's shiny, pretty, but useless to carry around with him. He puts it to one side of the table and under the small pile of damp papers just in case Sakura-san decided to come upstairs for something.

Akira flicks through the stack of papers, finding it easy to recall just where they'd come from just from the absurdity of the situation; a terror that was etched into his brain like a bad memory.

**An Infinite Font of Ideas: Madarame!** Along with a date of opening, the same one Kitagawa had told him about; he wondered if this is something that the clerk at Untouchables, Iwai-san, would be interested in, or if the tickets would be better in the trash.

Kitagawa's personal number, along with Madarame's, sit's folded up on the table, right next to the stack of tickets that he was still debating on.

Morgana jumps onto the table, pushing some of the trash pile onto the floor as he does so. Akira can't really bring himself to be annoyed with the mess for some reason, just watches as Morgana sniffs through the items until he lands on the only items not categorized.

"Madarame..." He whispers, quiet enough that, even in the dead silence of LeBlanc's attic, he strains to hear the other speaking.

Dark, oceanic eyes flit up to his gaze and Akira, on instinct rather than anything else looks away,
towards the far wall, then to the pile of trash on end of the table.

"These are from those weird guys outside of Mementos, aren't they?" Morgana questions, then after a moment, "You don't think that this Madarame is the same one Nakanohara's shadow was talking about, do you?"

"It seems too coincidental." Akira replies in way of answer, plucking his phone out from under one of the balled up papers Morgana had pushed over. He had had his suspicions, especially in the way that Kitagawa had called him sensei, just like Nakanohara had. The Madarame-sensei that Akira had met at the station, when he thought about it, wasn't setting off any alarms like Kamoshida had. The old man looked exactly that, like an old man. He didn't smack Kitagawa-san, didn't insult him, in fact, the man had encouraged him in his pursuits. He seemed, if anything, the complete opposite of what he knew of Kamoshida.

They couldn't be. Akira rationalizes, even if it leaves them without leads on Nakanohara's request.

"I suppose so, but didn't those guys seem suspicious?" Morgana continues, drawing him back into the present with his inquiry.

Akira shrugs. He wasn't thinking too much about it, really. Nakanohara, at his most vulnerable, said that Madarame was a vile, awful person; the person with Kitagawa-kun didn't fit that description, even if they were both teachers in a way.

"That aside, why don't you drop by the exhibit? A real phantom thief needs to be informed about fine arts, after all." Is suggested at his lack of response. Again, he shrugs, but pulls aside a few tickets for each of their group, Morgana included, just in case.

The subject was dropped after that, still leaving him with a stack of 23 tickets that he didn't know what do with, and a wallet filled with money that didn't belong to him, even if it was, as Morgana said, a copy of a Nakanohara's wallet and not the real thing.

Finally, after fifteen minutes of standing over the table and shifting his weight from foot to foot anxiously, Akira made a decision after hearing a noise from downstairs, reminding him of his caretaker's presence. He decided, all at once, that if Sakura-san wouldn't accept them, then he'd just throw them into the trash along with the remnants of the past week's lunches.

Piling the garbage into his arms and clasping the tickets, along with his phone, in his hands, Akira carefully steps into the cafe, dumping a week's worth of trash into the garbage can just outside of LeBlanc's kitchen. Sakura-san, who had been sitting behind the counter with another puzzle book in his hands looks up as soon as his garbage clatters into the bottom of the can. Instantly, a sharp gaze is pinning him down and Akira feels like he's just been caught with his pants down. Hesitantly, he approaches his temporary guardian and extends his arm out, handing over the tickets without explanation.

Sakura-san looks at him for another long moment, then down at his shaking hand. Akira tries his best to still his quaking fingers, but still spots the tremble in the dense paper where he keeps his attention focused.

"Uh," His guardian starts, his hand stretching into Akira's vision long enough to pull the stack away. "The Great Artist..."

Akira lets his hands drop by his sides, wondering if he should have just thrown the tickets away anyway.
"You steal these?" Sakura-san demands. His tone firm, yet quiet, so suddenly he might as well have been circles around him.

Swallowing around a lump in his throat, he quickly shakes his head, sending hair flopping into his eyes from around his glasses. The action manages to conceal most of Sakura-san's form from his vision and it numbs the phantom ache that had begun forming inside of his throat.

"Hm... Just checking. Don't really know what I'm gonna do with so many. Maybe some of my regulars will want one." His guardian says. Akira is pretty sure it's more to himself than to him, but doesn't let his guard drop a second time. "Uh, thanks, I guess. Sorry for barking at you, but trouble from you means trouble for me, understand?"

Akira bobs his head dutifully, and catches part of Sakura-san's facial hair doing the same.

"Maybe I'll start a raffle or something." He laughs, once, then quietly refers back to him, "Now get back upstairs or get to work, you're disturbing the customers."

Heading back upstairs, he folds the tickets into the copy of Nakanohara's wallet into his now clean bag and leaves his notebooks and dry-erase board out on the table. The silver necklace gets tucked away on the shelf by his bed, just beside the broken hearing aid from Mementos; he has no idea what else to do with it for now, he'd have to wait until he could work up the nerve to walk into Untouchables before he could try and sell it off and offering it to Sakura-san would most likely end up with him on the streets. Realizing that, he scooted both of the objects a little further back on the shelf, further out of line of sight, even for someone taller than Sakura-san.

Sighing, Akira climbs into bed and takes out his phone. Morgana is quick to join him on the mattress, folding over himself until he's all but a loaf of black fur next to him. He makes sure to keep some distance between the two of them as he pulls his phone out and opens their group chat for the first time since the incident at the station.

"There's an art exhibit tomorrow. I have extra tickets." He sends out, letting his phone fall against his stomach while he waits for a reply.

It comes with a faint buzz against his rib cage, then another.

"Didn't you say we shouldn't be hangin out with each other?" Comes from Ryuji.

"Sounds fun!"

"Oh, that's true..."

"Why don't we all go at different times then? or wear disguises!"

The last three are from Takamaki, each leaving him more confused than the last.

"Why do you even wanna go to somethin like that?"

Akira mentions Morgana's lessons in the fine arts.

"Sounds lame." Sakamoto says in kind.

"You would think that, Ryuji."

"Wait." Takamaki says when the chat has been silent for a few minutes, with Ryuji not responding and Akira unable to think of anything to say.
"It's not the Madarame exhibit, is it? The one that's opening tomorrow?"

_How did she guess that..._ Akira questions, just as Morgana articulates it.

"It is."

"So you think that this Madarame is the one that Nakanohara was talking about?" Something about what Takamaki says brings down the wall that had been built up in the chat. Everything had turned serious once more. "I saw this show on TV about him and was starting to look him up right after. I mean, Madarame isn't thank common of a name, is it?"

He had no idea, but he was still uncertain if Madarame is their target or not.

"You found the guy?" Ryuji pipes in, "That's our leader!"

Morgana scoffs down at the screen between them.

"I'm not sure if it's the same one." He admits, scooting back against the wall so he could type more easily. "It seems unlikely, he didn't seem like Kamoshida at all."

Ann's reply is near instantaneous, "You met Madarame?"

"Yes, at the train station."

She goes quiet after that, then finally replies with, "Then it must be fate, right? Like how we all met."

"Didn't you follow Akira and me into Kamoshida's palace because you were curious and then almost get yourself killed?" Ryuji points out.

"How dare he!" Morgana pipes up, slapping a paw onto the screen. "I'll teach him some respect!"

Akira peers over the cat's shoulder as he hovers over the screen, using one paw to type and the other to keep himself balanced.

"Donut taco women stupid ryuji!" Morgana's message reads out, sent before he could intervene. Auto-correct doing it's best to convey whatever Morgana's inhuman appendages could type out.

"Uh...?"

"Was that Morgana, Akira-kun?"

"How did she know it was me?" Akira hears as he's pulling the phone away and into his own hands.

"It was. Morgana says that you shouldn't talk to women like that, Ryuji."

"Whatever. So you said this place opens tomorrow?"

Akira hadn't read the tickets that closely to identify that, though, thinking about it, he probably should have asked for a time and date before he was forced into accepting over twenty tickets for a show he had no prior interest in attending.

"It opens in the morning. It's a few blocks away from the hotel that we went to, so taking
"Tozai line might be faster than what we did last time." Takamaki suggests to them. He thinks it might be good advice, but has no idea how to get onto that line, or where its entrance even lies. He remains silent though.

"Can't believe I'm wasting my weekend at an art exhibit... and I can't even sleep in!" Ryuji adds, just before logging off.

Takamaki is quick to follow and Akira sets his phone down, unsure of what to do or how to feel. Everything seemed to move so quickly around him. Takamaki had already began tracking Madarame down before he'd even mentioned it, had connected the dots while he fell into the puzzle by accident. Without evidence, it seemed even Ryuji was barreling ahead of him. He was lost, to say the least, and wanted to believe Madarame innocent.

"We shall see soon enough..." Arsene points out, voice so sudden that Akira jerks in place.

That truth, or what truth lie in it, was comfort enough to get him through the rest of the day, his exams mostly forgotten, but still an ever-present pressure at the back of his head, just like the persona residing with him; he hoped that he did well, or hoped that Sakura-san wouldn't be upset with him if he didn't. He knew, regardless of whatever scores he made, that his name would be running around the school, that he'd still be judged. By the students and everyone else. He was glad that he had a day to recuperate, though, even if most of it was going to spent at an exhibit he didn't really want to go to.

Tomorrow came more quickly than he'd thought it would, after cleaning out his bag and doing laundry across the street, he was completely exhausted and fell asleep almost instantly when the rain picked back up outside.

The weather cleared sometime while he was sleeping though, leaving behind a chilly air but bright skies; he left LeBlanc without an umbrella, mostly confident that he wouldn't need it and rode to the station with Morgana perched over his shoulder instead of inside of the bag. He hoped it was a good sign. His teammate seems more energetic today than he had the last; Akira attributes it to the extra sleep.

The Tozai line is labeled with a light blue sign that directs him past the one that he'd normally take to school or to Yongen-Jaya. Following the trail was simple enough, following the same brightly painted signs and keeping to himself, though the latter was much more difficult with how packed the place was today. The usual static of the place, stomping and squeaking shoes, was replaced with the unfamiliar roar of a stampede. Akira's pretty sure he's never been in the same room as this many people before; in fact he's certain that there's more people in this one station than there are in his hometown.

He hoped that none of them would be attending Madarame's exhibit. He'd easily go crazy, or deaf at the very least.

Finding a seat on the train that headed to the south part of Shibuya was impossible, he soon figured out as he was all but crammed in between a group of people he didn't know. He could smell each of them and feel them breathing against him, their chests expanding and pushing into his.

He felt disgusting.

The station on the other end of the Tozai line was equally as packed, but somehow quieter. Not wasting much time, he tries his best to find the exit without shoving anyone out of the way, but the waves of people passing in front of him are unrelenting and Akira is practically vibrating out of his skin by the time he reaches the exit. He steps to the side, unsure of which way he's supposed to be
going but knowing that he needs to find a quiet place before he throws up. That quiet place is just around the corner and inside of a dirty alleyway where the sun's light somehow doesn't reach. The walls are close enough together that he has to pace in sideways, but it's well worth having his clothes scuffed up when he's finally away from all the noise.

It takes him a few minutes of deep breathing to slow his heart down to a reasonable pace, a few extra slow exhales to slow down his frazzled brain. When he's ready, he pulls out his phone.

"I'm outside of the station."

"Cool! I'm at the exhibit already." Takamaki reports, much to his surprise.

"You're really into this art shit ain't'cha, Ann?" Ryuji sends back, "I'll be like 10-15, trains are fucking packed today."

Akira draws out another sigh, wondering if it'd be better for him to head over the exhibit now or wait for Sakamoto. Quickly, he decides on the latter. He doesn't even know where this exhibit actually is, aside from the general location that Takamaki had provided; and it would be nice not to try and weave his way through any busy streets alone.

"I'm waiting for you at the station." He sends to Sakamoto directly once he's made his decision.

"OK."

Ryuji arrives, true to his word, fifteen minutes later with a message, "Where are ya?"

Akira steps outside of the small alleyway and, as much as he dreads it, steps back into the station square.

He spots Sakamoto almost immediately, now that he's seen the other boy in casual clothing. He's even wearing the same jacket from the last time they'd gone been in this area, bright purple and slouched posture. Akira walks up to him and isn't spotted until they're right next to each other, the blond having scoped in all the wrong places to spot him.

Sakamoto's head flicks around. Then he jumps.

"Fucking shit!" He screams, right into the station. The area around them goes quiet, the people slowing down.

Ryuji grabs at his chest, bunching up his bright purple jacket around his heart. "Fucking say somethin' next time, you almost gave me a heart-" His face goes blank, then his eyes widen, "Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that..."

Akira shrugs. He hadn't any intentions of scaring Sakamoto and wishes that he could have said something, but that desire was so faint, so old, he barely recognized it for what it was.

He apologizes.

Sakamoto waves him off with one hand and grabs at his wrist with the other, "Let's just get outta here before someone calls security, we're already gettin' looked at."

Ryuji leads him out of the station by his wrist. Without having to watch where he's walking-hopefully- Akira looks out around him and, true enough to Sakamoto's observation, there were people staring down at them as they head towards the exit. He catches the eye of one of them, a tall man in a police uniform, and her quickly jerks his head towards the ground, hoping that staring
was all that they'd do. Once he feels the sun, or most of it at least, on his skin, his chest gives out, a huge sigh gusting out of his mouth before he can stop it. His face was warm, heated uncontrollably, and the small ordeal he'd caused had him sweating more than reasonably considering the weather.

They don't stop walking for a long time, with Sakamoto's grip on his arm working as his navigation, Akira continues to stare at the ground between his trainers and Sakamoto's sneakers as they head further into the city. The monotony is almost soothing, if it weren't for the constant hum of machinery or chattering of nearby people, he'd almost say being lead around was relaxing; the mostly warm weather was a contributing factor as well. All in all, it's easy for him to get lost in thought, to worry needlessly about his test scores or about his struggling relationships. About his parents back home, how they'd yet to contact him at all.

The hand guiding him loosens, then falls away. Akira looks up at the change and spots a massive semi-circle surrounding one of the buildings along the street.

*This must be it...* Part of him recognizes.

"Big crowd... Do people really like this crap?" Ryuji mumbles out from in front of him, a purple pillar between him and the massive crowd.

Akira checks the time, but isn't sure why, he had no idea when the place was supposed to open.

"Ryuji! Akira-kun!" A voice calls out.

Ann approaches from around the still forming crowd. He catches Ryuji shifting his weight from one foot to the other; he does the same, cradling his bag, and Morgana, with one arm.

"I thought you said this place opens in the morning, why the hell is there still a line?" Ryuji says as soon as Takamaki is close enough.

"It does!" The blonde insists, running a hand through one of her pigtails, then the other. "I just wanted to make sure we had enough time to check out the exhibit *and* check out Madarame, you know?"

"W-well, what time does this place open then?" Ryuji drawls.

"Oh, in about thirty minutes or so, I think."

"You think..."

"Mhm!"

It takes an hour for them to get into the door and, during that hour, he really wanted to go back to LeBlanc and forget about this whole investigation. People were loud, people were shoving him, and he'd never been good with people or making his presence known, so he stood there while old women slapped him with their purses and kids stepped on his foot as they ran wishes that it would start raining again, hoping that it would thin out the line. It'd also help with the continual stream of sweat that running down his back.

Wiping his hands hands on his jeans for what felt like the hundredth time, Akira scoops a hand under Morgana's form and grabs onto the copy of Nakanohara's wallet to hand his teammates their tickets. He put's Morgana's pack into the fold of the wallet and advances through the gate, stepping into the exhibit. It's air conditioned, which he appreciates, but more plain that he'd been expecting, dark blue walls and a bright, shiny tiles for the floor. It was fancy, but not completely extravagant like the tickets suggested; the hotel Ann had suggested really set his expectations for these kinds of
things. Using Takamaki and Ryuji as leads, Akira steps further into the building but jumps in place as a voice booms in his direction.

"You came!" A man says, stepping out of the crowd that he towers over. Akira catches the strange, dark hair before Kitagawa-san's face is smiling in his direction. He has no idea how the man spotted him through the crowd he'd been standing in as well the wall in front of him. Nevertheless, the tall man approaches them with a smile.

"You brought some people. Your handler and manager, I presume?" Kitagawa questions, eyeing up Sakamoto and Takamaki as he comes to a stop in front of the four of them. Unlike the last time they'd met, Kitagawa-san was dressed rather nicely, and, just like last time, Akira felt like he was practically a walking slob when he compared the two of them.

"Uh..." Ryuji says, "Who are you?"

Kitagawa's smile falls into a flat line, his eyes serious as he brushes a hand down the fold of his dark blazer. "My name is Kitagawa Yusuke, I'm studying at Kosei High's Fine-Arts division as a second-student, I am also Madarame-sensei's latest pupil. I'd've thought your client would have told you about my offer."

"Offer?" Ryuji continues.

"Yeah, what offer?" Ann presses.

Kitagawa looks annoyed, but speaks in the same calm, lofty tone. "I want to use him as a model for my next piece; Madarame-sensei has already given me his blessing in the matter and says that he'd be an excellent model for oil painting."

Akira feels his face heat up again, but not from the spring heat. In fact, all but his face are starting to chill over in the icy atmosphere.

"Nah, he never told us anything like that." Continues Ryuji, speaking for all of them once again.

"Well then, I'd like to reissue my invitation. Would you be interested in your client becoming my latest muse?" Kitagawa questions with a bow.

Ryuji looks over his shoulder and down at him. There's a frown marring what part of the blond's face that he can see and Akira quickly glances away, not sure if he should be mortified or embarrassed but feeling both completely.

"Listen uh... Yusuke. We ain't-" Ryuji starts, only to yelp as Takamaki's elbow comes into contact with his stomach. He winces.

"I'm sure... our client is very um, flattered by your invitation, Kitagawa-kun, but we'd really like to... discuss... the terms and conditions of your work with your sensei before any modeling occurs." Ann stutters out, bowing when she's finished.

"Conditions? Oh, yes, of course, my sincerest apologies." Kitagawa-san bows again, then stands to his full height to scan over the crowd with his strangely-colored eyes. "Madarame-sensei should be around here somewhere..." He notes, then walks off without another word.

He's strange...

"You have very little room to talk, pet." Arsene says with a laugh, and, like the last time his persona spoke up that day, Akira jumps because of it.
"We'll get an explanation later." Takamaki says, peering over at him.

He shrugs, and hopes it comes out more casually than it feels. Somehow, he doubt its, considering he's still mortified beyond belief to really formulate any other response.

His teammates step forward, dodging around the small groups that are forming around each of the exhibit's paintings. He doesn't really have time to observe any one of them before they're stopped by another group of people. Madarame is among them, in the center of it all, with a camera in his face.

"Sensei is in the middle of an interview." Kitagawa says from out of nowhere, making him jump again, this time from the proximity, or therefore lack of, than anything else. If the artist notices his reaction, as when Akira looks up, his eyes are pinned down on his teacher and not looking down at him- Akira had no idea how the man even noticed his approach- he doesn't say anything of it. He's grateful for that, at least.

"We're joined by Madarame Ichiryusai today, congratulating him on his new art exhibit right here in Shibuya." A woman, dressed as fancy, if not fancier, than Kitagawa-san says into a microphone that she's holding, "Now, Madarame-sama, you've painted hundreds upon hundreds of paintings since your emergence as an artist. All of us continued to be surprised by your imagination. You have such expansive styles, it's hard to believe that it all stems from one person! Can you tell us, and all of our viewers at home, where does all your inspiration come from?"

His phone vibrates in his pocket, but is pressed too firmly from the crowd behind him to reach his arm back and check it.

The lady extends the microphone until it's almost almost touching the collar of Madarame's yukata, which is the same color as all of the walls closing them in. He wonders if it was on purpose or not. Sakura-san's apron, or any of his clothes, matched the interior of LeBlanc.

Madarame clears his throat before speaking. His voice is soft, just like he remembers it at the train station. "Of course, my dear, but it is... rather difficult to put it all into words. But, if I had to, I'd say that they naturally well up from within my heart, like bubbles rising one after another in a spring."

"How poetic..." Ryuji murmurs at his other side. Immediately, the crowd forming around the interview are shushing him, Takamaki included.

"Naturally, you say!" The lady says into the mic before pointing back at Madarame.

"Of course, what's most important about being an artist is to distance oneself from worldly desires, such as fortune or fame. My own atelier is but a modest shack, but is more than enough to pursue true beauty."

The crowd gasps quietly, a static that makes him want to clamp his hands over his ears.

His phone vibrates again.

The lady pulls her microphone back, "I see! The act of emptying one's mind gives rise to inner beauty, wouldn't you say, Madarame-sama?"

Madarame laughs, tugging at his whitened beard with one hand. The action reminds him of Sakura-san. "Of course, a peaceful mind is a beautiful mind, after all."

The crowd cheers again; Akira still has no idea why.
"Still," The lady continues once it goes quiet again, "To think we'd all hear the word 'shack' coming from someone as pronounced as the great artist, Madarame."

Again, Madarame laughs into the microphone, sending the noise across the entire room, "You'd understand if you saw it, I'm sure."

"Of course we'd love to hear more about what inspires someone as great as Madarame, but unfortunately, that's all we have time for today! Madarame-sama is very busy maintaining his newly opened exhibit, right after this panel, he'll even be selecting people to receive his autograph! What a hard working man! If you can afford to, please come show Japan's greatest artist your support in Shibuya. " Despite the- seemingly bad- news, the lady still holds a smile as she bows in front of Madarame, then to the camera.

The crowd roars, then he's being shoved again. The chant of Madarame's name is, without a doubt, filling every inch of the place.

"You'll have to forgive me, I believe sensei will be- Watch where you're putting your hands! Very busy for the next few moments!" Kitagawa-san calls out over the rampage, standing taller than nearly everyone in the room but, like him, still being subject to the shoving of customers as they all desperately attempt to reach Madarame for an autograph.

He doesn't see any more of Kitagawa after that, the taller boy disappearing into the exhibit somewhere. Takamaki too, though it seems Ryuji was shoved in the same direction as he was and stands beside him as he tries to readjust himself to the crowd.

"God this place sucks." Ryuji says, leaning against the wall, almost too close to one of the hanging paintings. "Can't we just leave? It's too early for this shit."

Morgana pulls himself out from under him, a sliding pressure against his ribs and back before he tugs himself onto his shoulder. "Regardless of the crowd, it would be a waste of an opportunity to leave before we have a chance to appreciate this place. Besides, I don't see Lady Ann anywhere, and I don't trust any of these people. They look suspect."

'Does he say that about everyone...' Akira's mind wanders, taking what he can of a step back as another purse-wielding lady tries to amble past. The exhibit was starting to become the buffet all over again and, regardless of what he might miss out on, he'd rather be at LeBlanc, or anywhere less crowded, really; he feels stupid, in all honesty, for thinking that places like Shujin or Big Bang Burger were crowded in comparison to places like this, but he was past his threshold of acceptable environments and wanted out.

"Listen, if I could walk a foot- half a foot in front of me, maybe I'd say fuck it, let's look at some finger-paintings or whatever, but I've been slapped with like six different purses and it's hot in here, I'm leavin'." Ryuji grinds out, using one of his purple clothed arms to force a path between merging groups.

Akira doesn't waste any time. He follows his teammate, his very vulgar teammate, as he shoves his way through people, seeming uncaring about the verbal harassment he receives on the way towards the exit.

The outside of Madarame's exhibit is no less crowded than the inside, in Akira's opinion, but there is a nice breeze that's filtering through the rampage that's starting to cool down the sweat beading up in his hairline. He wants to go home, even though he knows he should wait on Kitagawa-san. Takamaki at the very least.
His phone buzzes again.

When he pulls it out of his pocket, he's expected messages from Ann, or Ryuji. So when he sees the startling crimson red of MetaNav opened, he swallows instinctively as it actively tries to seal itself shut. Something had set it off, just like the first time that he and Ryuji had wandered into Kamoshida's castle. Upon further inspection, he found that two criteria were already filled in.

**Madarame Ichiryusai**

**Shack**

Then a final, damning blank.

Akira glances around for his teammate, either one of them, to show them the evidence but finds himself at completely alone inside of the crowd of strangers. Panicked, he maneuvers towards the outer edge of the crowd, then finally beyond it. The streets were still busy, but least he could see more than a cyclone of limbs and neckties. Taking a look around, he doesn't spot Sakamoto's familiar purple or Takamaki's distinct hair anywhere outside. He takes the next logical step and walks away from the building and around the corner, truly alone; no crowd and no screaming.

It's merely a coincidence- or perhaps fate, like Takamaki had suggested- that he finds Ryuji standing in front of a vending machine that's tucked away in the corner. Something he'd have never noticed if he hadn't come down here.

Dashing forward, he clasps onto one of Ryuji's purple sleeves, making himself known. The blond jumps, but doesn't scream, as he does this, so Akira figures he'd done the right thing.

"Fucking shit, dude." Ryuji gasps out, then sobers up, "Sorry, didn't mean to ditch you but those old ladies are vicious, ya know?"

Akira pushes his phone forward, presenting the MetaNav, and watches as Ryuji's eye widen, his eyebrows climbing towards his messy hair.

"That prick's actually got a palace?"

Nodding, he pulls his phone away. He's disappointed. That he'd been wrong. That against all odds, someone nice was distorted enough to have their own palace. He felt sorry for Kitagawa-san, wondering if he was being treated like the Shujin student body when nobody was able to peer into doings of someone as prestigious as Madarame. Part of him didn't want to find out, but a greater part of him- the slowly burning fire that he recognized as his other half- knew that he had to. For Kitagawa's sake if nothing else.

"What happened?" Morgana questions from just below his shoulder.

Akira catches a pair of large blue eyes peering up at him, then around the alley, then, noticing that they were mostly alone, climbs out the rest of the way and leaps onto the vending machine in front of them.

"Did something happen with Madarame?" He questions from the new vantage point.

"Uh, yeah, Madarame's got a hit on the Nav is what happened." Ryuji explains. His smile is nothing short of a pearly scythe. He seemed, if nothing else, happy about Akira being wrong. That was also disappointing.

"So it was the same person..." Morgana notes.
"Seems so, on the bright side, the Phantom Thieves got their next target. And it's a celebrity, well... sort of a celebrity." Ryuji confirms, his smile still present, made more pertinent with the whoop he lets out afterwards.

"Shouldn't we tell Lady Ann that she's in the same building as someone with a palace, then?" Morgana quips, standing up tall on the machine.

"She'll be fine." Ryuji assures, pressing money into the machine as if everything were normal. "She's a big girl, besides, she'd probably be more pissed at you for makin' her leave than anything Madarame might do."

Morgana sighs, but seems to drop the subject. His body sinks against the machine's flat top, his chin peering over its lip.

"Here." Ryuji says suddenly, sticking a bottle into his face.

Akira considers declining, but can't draw up an explanation before the drink is pushed into his hands; he was starting to get hungry.

"Kinda sucks that the Phantom Thieves are waitin' around in a place like this, though." Ryuji sighs, popping open his drink, which also sighs. "Seems kinda lame, doesn't it?"

He shrugs, still rather numb at the prospect of being wrong about Madarame and Kitagawa and definitely still reeling from the aftermath of dealing with his crowd of fans. They were pretty much the opposite of everything that knew him, wanting to beg at his feet while people looked at him, and his record, with disgust. He's not sure which he'd rather prefer, in all honesty. Fame seemed more inconvenient than Akira's own infamy would let on.

"Patience is a virtue." Morgana says sagely.

Ryuji doesn't reply.

The three of them stand around in the alleyway, waiting for on Takamaki to make an appearance.

Hours pass before Takamaki messages the both of them, questioning where they went off to. Sakamoto rolls his eyes, dropping another can into the nearest dumpster as he slouches over his phone.

"It's about time she's done." The blond mutters.

"Waiting outside, around the corner from the exhibit." He fills in when Ryuji doesn't.

Takamaki steps into the alley a few minutes later, wearing a smile and a different shirt, it has the name of the exhibit on it, as does her hat, and the bag that's hanging from her arm.

"What?" She snaps, unprovoked, "It was probably my only chance to go to an art exhibit by Madarame and I'm not letting go to waste... even if it was a bit over-priced."

"That very well may be true, Lady Ann." Morgana comments. His tone is like being drenched in ice water.

Takamaki's smile falters into nothingness. "W-what do you mean by that, Morgana?"

Ryuji jumps in again, "Akira found Madarame on the Nav thing, he definitely has a palace."

"Oh..." She says quietly. "Is it really possible for someone like him to have one? He seemed so..."
"The name and the place of distortion fits, though, there's no mistaking it. This Madarame is the one we're after." Morgana corrects.

"I see."

Ryuji jumps in again, fiercely barking at the three of them, "What the hell? Shouldn't we be happy about this? Or not mopin' around at least, we gotta target now? We can see what that bastard is really like when he's not around all these people kissing his feet."

"That's true." Takamaki admits, her face picks back up into a smile, "Then it's a good thing Yusuke-kun is so interested in our client then, isn't it, Ryuji?"

"Our- what the hell are you talkin' about?" Ryuji splutters back.

"Well," She starts, "After you two ditched me-"

Ryuji interrupts before she can finish, "We didn't ditch shit, those old-fucking-bags practically pushed us out, ain't that right?"

Akira shrugs. Ryuji groans.

"As I was saying, when you two ditched me, Yusuke-kun started talking to me about his next art piece, and how he met Akira-kun at the station, looking like," She clears her throats, then continues dramatically, "A rose peaking at the pinnacle of dawn, covered in dew. Unabashed by human notion. Without fault. Peaceful with radiating melancholy that beseeches the stillest of hearts!"

Akira blinks, wondering if he should be offended or not; Kitagawa had never said any of those things in his needlessly long examination of his sleeping expression.

"He wants you to model for him." She points out.

His head bobs.

"Meaning?" Ryuji questions.

Takamaki's eyes roll then level on him, intensely and piercing, "Meaning that if he agrees, we'd have access to Madarame's shack and we can see what he's up to, and we still need the last keyword for it to work, don't we?"

"The form that the palace takes." Morgana explains, drawing back into a standing position atop the vending machine, "Whatever Madarame views his distortion truly as. We should definitely be able to gather some clues from looking around his home. Good thinking, Lady Ann."

"It's just Ann."

"So we just let this Yusuke guy paint him while we snoop around his house, then?" Ryuji questions.

"Unless you can think of another way to get into the palace."

"So how do we get into contact with him then?"

Takamaki turns away from Ryuji and stares at him again, "Yusuke-kun said that Akira already had
his contact information. If you don't mind me asking, though, where did you even run into him, Akira-kun?"

"Yeah, I'm curious about that too!" Ryuji's attention fixes on him as well.

"I was sleeping at the station and I woke up with him standing there, asking if he could paint me." He explains, skipping over the other, mostly unimportant, details.

"Why were you sleeping at the station?" Takamaki giggles.

Akira shrugs, tugging a piece of his hair without meaning to. "I was tired."

"He seems like a weird dude, I dunno how I'd react if some dude was standin' over me while I was sleeping. Even if you were in public." Ryuji adds with a shudder.

When he put it like that, Akira could see how the picture he'd painted was fairly unusual, creepy even.

"So, when should we head over there?" Sakamoto questions, drawing Akira's attention back into the present.

"He said he'd be pretty busy over the next few weeks while he helps with the exhibit, but would work around his subject's schedule for the most part." Takamaki points out.

"After school on Monday then?" Ryuji suggests, "We figure out what his palace is, then we can beat his ass before he realizes it."

"We shouldn't be too hasty." Morgana advises from his lofty position, "If we approach him unprepared, we might find ourselves in more trouble than we realize."

Ryuji rebuttals quickly and with acid dripping from his words, "But if we don't do somethin' fast, that Yusuke guy might get it, you know?"

Ann's swallow is loud in the otherwise empty alley.

"But-" Morgana attempts, only to be interrupted by a steely voice.

"I'm with Ryuji on this one." She says, "If something were to happen to anyone else and we could have done something, shouldn't we take that risk?"

Akira had thought the same about Suzui. How if they'd just pushed themselves further, they could have prevented her from jumping. Yusuke might not be as fortunate as her if he was ever pushed into that corner. A sense of urgency washed over him like he was being pushed straight into a fire, burning up from the inside and he felt more than energized despite the exhaustion pulsing behind his eyes.

"Tomorrow then." Morgana complies.

"I hope you're ready to be a model then, Akira-kun." Ann says pleasantly, the previous tension distilling into a vague memory. "If you need any tips, you can just ask."

He nods, beginning to follow them towards the station, even when he knew it was a bad idea; Takamaki's stalker taking the backseat to their now current, more concrete, issue.

They split up before they hit central station, though, promising to alternate trains just in case the
student council, like Takamaki theorized, was actually following her around. At Morgan's suggestion, they send her off first, sending her home on the next train in the direction of her parent's home. Ryuji pushes him onto the platform just before the next train arrives and waves him off, telling him to inform Yusuke of his agreement.

LeBlanc was slowly turning into a haven for him, albeit a smelly one, but definitely a quiet place for him to think. The attic, specifically, was a great place for him to think, even as dust settled on every surface before his very eyes. It took some time, for him to rationalize, to go over everything again; he knew that he had to gain access to Madarame's palace, for the Phantom Thieves' sake, as well as Kitagawa-san's. Something about the situation though, left him with doubts. A part of him wanted to believe in the greater good, that someone as genuine appearing as Madarame couldn't possibly be like Kamoshida; and somehow worse than Nakanohara, to have his own palace. At the same time, a cynical part of him perhaps, knew that the MetaVerse would reveal the truth, regardless of whatever truths Akira tried to put up in defense.

_Could someone like him truly be evil? _He pondered, then, _Sakura-san seems so evil, but is he really the opposite? _Did something about adulthood change their perceptions to become so warped that the outside didn't mirror the inside. He thought of the teachers at his old school, who ignored him, and his disability- though nowhere near to the extent that Shujin did. What of them, then, those neither good or bad; a painful neutral. Would his parents fall into that category? Painfully neutral to his circumstances. Did they resent him down to their cores, as corrupted as Kamoshida?

_Were they in Mementos? _Were they somehow worse than he thought they were?

He couldn't bring himself to pull up the MetaNav, but he did pull out the folded up piece of paper that Kitagawa-san had handed that day at the station and texted him.

"I agree to become your model." The words weren't ones he'd ever thought he'd type in his life; he was not model material, in any sense of the word.

Kitagawa didn't reply until morning, when he was already on the train bound for Shiuya. "Excellent. I've already left my address with your manager. I look forward to working with you. Was there a time and day that you wished to begin?"

He thought of Ryuji's warning, not even concerned with whom his manager might be. "Today."

"Of course. Once I get home from school, I'll begin setting up my equipment."

The school day that follow was a long one. Time seemed so slow in comparison to the recent days, and he's certain that he'd been called upon to answer more questions in a single school day than he had since coming to Shujin. By the time he was walking through the school gates on the way to the station, he was more than exhausted and almost considered texting Kitagawa to reschedule.

He didn't get the opportunity.

Both Ryuji and Takamaki were waiting against the station. Standing together, even when they shouldn't.

"You ready t'go?" Ryuji asks, still managing to smile despite the grim, and definitely dangerous, circumstances they were putting themselves into.

He nods more out of principle than any actual enthusiasm to continue.

"I don't really recognize the address to his place, but it's definitely in the residential district off
central street, so it shouldn't be too hard to find." Takamki explains, pulling out her phone and heading towards the exit he'd just entered from.

The walk to Kitagawa's- or rather Madarame's- home is a confusing one, but Takamaki guides the four of them through many long streets and turns until they arrive in a mostly suburban area without saying a word. The area is completely different from the rest of what he's seen of Tokyo, though he can still see the skyscrapers piercing through the clouds, the area around them is mostly double story buildings. If each of the houses weren't packed together as tightly as they were, Akira could almost say it reminded him of home; differences aside, the nostalgia stuck him like flame had been lit under him. When he was living there, Akira didn't think he'd hold any nostalgia for a place that had all but cast him out. That feeling remained, despite his frustration.

"Oh, this one reads Madarame!" Ryuji points out, pulling Akira out of himself with a tug on his arm.

"T-this one is Madarame's?" Ann says, shock evident, even to him.

"It really is a shack." Morgana says with a snort.

In front of them, Madarame's shack is quite literally a shack. A foreboding two-story building that looks so different than the others around it. Its walls are made of rusted over metal that matches the roof and the small yard in front of it is growing over the stone fence that guards the front door. The nameplate on that fence, much to Ryuji's observation, reads Madarame.

"You'd think an artist like Madarame would hire a landscaper or something." Ann ponders, stepping towards the rusted gate that connects the two ends of the crumbling stone walls. "Does Kitagawa-kun really live in a place like this?"

"Only one way to find out." Sakamoto pushes the gate open, sending a plume of blood-colored dust into the air as he does so. Chips of blackened rust fall off the fence where he grabs onto it.

_Gross._ He sympathizes, though he's unsure if it's more for the fence or for Ryuji.

"I hope there's no snakes in here." The blond complains, wiping his hand, the one he'd used to open the gate, onto his uniform pants before stepping into the overflowing yard in front of Madarame's shack.

"No kidding." Takamaki replies with a laugh. She turns back towards him, "Cats can hunt snakes though, right, Morgana?"

Morgana's frame vibrates against his shoulder. "I'm not a cat!"

His pants are covered in dried out foliage by the time the reach the door. When he wipes at it, it jumps from the fabric, but doesn't come off. He sighs, annoyed; he'd just washed his uniform yesterday and really didn't want to have to do so again after only one day.

"Ready?" Takamaki questions. Her finger is hovering over a dust-covered plastic button. It's an object that would look more fitting inside of LeBlanc's attic than outside of someone's house. But when he nods, and her painted fingernail presses it in with an audible buzz, he supposes that this house, if any he's ever seen, was also a fitting resting place for it.

"Hello?" A robotic voice filters through. He can barely recognize it as Kitagawa-kun.

"Uh, hey, Yusuke-kun, it's Takamaki. I brought my er... client." She replies into the small speaker, just below where Kitagawa's voice is filtering through.
Akira flinches back, a loud clamber erupts noisily from somewhere in the house. Then another, just before the door in front of them slides open, Kitagawa-san is standing on the other side of it, standing as tall as Akira remembers, if not more so. He's wearing what must be the uniform to the school that he's going to, as Akira spots a badge around the man's collar that mimics his own, reflecting his status as a second-year. His shoes are off and he's not wearing socks, so Akira can see Kitagawa's toes as they wiggle up and down. It's a strange thing to watch, but Akira can't figure out where to lock his gaze and Kitagawa-san's feet are distractedly pale.

"You'll have to forgive me." Kitagawa-san says cordially, speaking in the same calm tone he'd used at the exhibit. "I couldn't arrange for sensei to be here when you arrived, but he said he's be more than willing to discuss any offers you have regarding my project."

Takamaki's back straightens, "Y-yes, of course. We'd love to discuss more about this... collaboration between you and my, um, client."

"Excellent, then please come in. I have my house to myself while sensei is attending to his exhibit, so we'll have plenty of quiet to work in." Kitagawa-san flourishes his form backwards and extends an arm to them, it's a strange gesture, but when Takamaki steps inside with Ryuji a step behind her, Akira finds himself following their lead and stepping into Madarame's shack.

The smell hits him almost immediately. Dust and decay filter into his nose and reminds him that he hadn't eaten lunch that day. His empty stomach revolts against the near putrid scent of Madarame's home.

"Please excuse the mess." Kitagawa-san says, taking another few steps back and gesturing towards the stairs behind him. "My studio is upstairs."

Akira glances around the room, trying to identify the smell first. The first floor of Madarame's shack is almost empty, save for the built in counter top and one oddly shaped table to one side of the stairs. The other side is an empty room filled with light from the windows. He can see dust falling from the ceiling in each of the beams shooting through the glass, it lands on the empty floor.


The smell of the first floor fades out as he ascends the stairs, or perhaps it's that he's getting used to it, but is replaced with a sterile, nose-numbing odor instead. He still hears Ryuji gagging quietly into his sleeve as they walk up the dust covered stairs, though.

"This is it." Kitagawa informs them, sliding open another door to their left before stepping inside.

The room that Kitagawa walks them into is bare, but not empty like any of the others rooms they've seen thus far. In the center of the room is a single stool, with a few others to each side of the room. Easel stands rest in each corner of the room, except by the one by the door, which has a rolled up futon instead. The floor, and parts of the ceiling, are dotted in a rainbow of colors; which Akira thinks might explain the smell. The far wall has a long window the extends from one wall to the other with an equally long table under it, it's covered in open cans of paint, which also might explain the smell, and art supplies Akira can't really identify.

"This is uh, really somethin'" Ryuji states, crossing his arms over his chest as he steps into the room.

"Thank you." Kitagawa accepts, stepping behind the only standing easel stand in the room. "The time for pleasantries is over, though, if your client wouldn't mind sitting in that stool, I can begin
working immediately; I have a feeling this piece will be my greatest one yet."

Akira settles into the single stool in the middle of the room and right across from Kitagawa's line of sight. He slides his bag off of his shoulder and sits it, and Morgana, carefully on the paint speckled floor, taking care to avoid any spots that look wet.

This is uncomfortable. He can't help but think, referring both to the wobbly stool and to the intense look that Kitagawa-san is alternating between him and the canvas. The artist's hand had already begun moving, etching lines into the blank canvas between them.

"Your handler and manager may sit down, or excuse themselves from the premises." Kitagawa-san delineates, extending his free hand to the empty stools on one side of the room. His gaze doesn't leave him, or the canvas, as he says this; an action Akira finds incredibly odd. He shrinks down onto the stool.

"Uh, if it's all the same to you, we're gonna... go to the bathroom." Ryuji says, tugging at Takamaki's arm. "Handler my ass..."

Akira frowns, turning back to the artist in front of him. Kitagawa-san doesn't respond, or look up, as his teammates abandon the room. Nor does he react from the whispering from just beyond the closed door that Akira can barely hear, or when that whispering goes downstairs with the thudding of feet. It's as if the man doesn't even recognize anything outside of the room, outside of him and the easel between them. The thought is a creepy one.

"Hmm." Kitagawa-san says eventually, holding a pencil towards him, then applying it back to the canvas.

Akira watches, uncomfortable, as this process repeats several times, noise included.

"Would you mind calling your handler in here." Kitagawa-san requests, an eternity later, taking to his feet. The bones in his legs pop noisily and Akira cringes, but nods regardless, fleeing from the room as modestly as he can, taking Morgana with him.

"That guy is a weirdo..." Morgana whispers from the bag as Akira glances down one end of the hallway, then the other, looking for any signs of yellow hair and spotting none.

His teammates are downstairs, of all places, standing in the bare kitchen. The refrigerator is open, but dark inside, as well as empty. His stomach winces at the sight more than his brain cringes at the implication. All of the cabinets are open as well, each of the shelves are as empty as the fridge. Takamaki and Sakamoto are both leaning against the counter when he steps into the room and look up when he walks down.

"Done?" Ryuji questions, his smile from before is all but a sneer. He looks dangerous.

He shakes his head.

"Well, I don't think he's stoppin' for a snack anytime soon?" The blond mutters darkly.

"He might not be beating Yusuke-kun, but he certainly isn't taking care of his needs. This place is... it's disgusting. How can anyone live like this? How can anyone let their student live like this..." Ann criticizes. Her frown is pronounced, but her anger is evident, like a flame threatening to burn down the paper thin walls of the building around them.
He steps forward, "Kitagawa-san wants you, handler-kun."

"M-me?" Ryuji barks back, eyes wide, "What for? And that ain't funny, dude!"

Akira shrugs meekly in reply. Kitagawa hadn't said what he needed the blond for, only that he retrieve him.

Ryuji sighs, then turns to Takamaki, but Morgana speaks up before he can say anything.

"Did you guys find any clues for the last keyword?"

Takamaki frowns, looking at the empty kitchen around them. "We've only looked around the first floor, but there's nothing like that here."

"Yeah," Ryuji concedes, "An' we haven't looked upstairs 'cause we don't want to get caught snoopin' around..."

Morgana snorts, jumping onto one of the dusty counters, "I don't think that'll be a problem, that Yusuke guy barely looks up from his painting." He turns to Takamaki, "Between the two of us, we should be able to look through the rest of the house before anyone notices a thing."

Takamaki nods, "Right."

"Guess I'll go handle... something, or whatever." Ryuji slaps a hand down onto his shoulder, and guides him back towards the stairs, "Come on, model-san, can't keep the nice man waiting."

Sakamoto's grin is infectious.

Kitagawa-san is still on the far side of the room when Ryuji's hand guides him into the studio, but his back is turned to them.

"Ah, you're back. Excellent. Hold this." Kitagawa says, crossing the room until he's standing within arm's reach. He towers over Akira, and looms just over Ryuji as he hands the other boy a metal watering can.

"We gardening now?" Ryuji snorts, taking the object, but nearly dropping it back onto the floor as it exchanges into his hand. Clear water splashes out of the hole in the top, splattering onto the wood flooring.

"I've been thinking about the pose for this piece." Kitagawa-san starts without missing a beat, as if he's already blocked out their existence and is merely speaking to the canvas across the room. "I think rain would suit the composition beautifully, so if you wouldn't mind stripping yourself of your clothing, I'll guide you into the pose I've deemed most suitable."

Akira's mind goes blank for a moment, then recalibrates with something bordering on outrage.

Strip? His heart hammers at the prospect, a painful sensation, like nails being slammed into his coffin. His cheeks catch fire too, mortified by the implication. Nobody should see something like that. Whatever Kitagawa saw in him as a model would never hold up once the taller boy saw the endless slashing on his skin or anything else that was wrong with him. He tried to swallow, tried to breathe, but found both incredibly difficult without extreme effort.

"W-what the hell!" Ryuji stammers out, his voice echoes throughout the small studio.

Kitagawa remains unfazed, his face calm, and tone uncomfortably calm, "Hmm, did I say
"Yeah you did, you pervert!" Ryuji balks, "Asking him to strip? Was that your plan from the beginnin'?"

Kitagawa-san tilts his head to the side, dark bangs fall away from his icy eyes. "It was merely for his convenience, I meant no offense. The water would dampen his clothing and would be uncomfortable for extended periods of time."

The explanation, to Akira at least, seemed reasonable enough, but still unusual, undeniably so.

"He ain't takin' his clothes off." Ryuji condemns, his cheeks are flushed, detracting from his serious tone and dark expression, "Or you're findin' another model, got it?"

Kitagawa agrees, settling back into the stool on the far end of the room without another word. Akira takes that as his queue to sit down as well, leaving his teammate to stand off to the side with a watering can and a sour expression. Akira watches, still nervous, still alert, as Kitagawa pulls his pencil back into the air, then presses it to the canvas. The process continues for a long time before he speaks again.

"If you would remove your glasses and tilt your head back." He says, blue eyes staring at him intensely.

Akira pulls his hands up slowly. He's hesitant to remove something so vital to a practical stranger. He knew, logically, that if Kitagawa were to recognize him, that he would have done so by now. He pockets his glasses and fights the urge to push them up on his nose. He feels naked all of a sudden, painfully exposed. Tilting his head back, Akira bares his neck slowly until he's told to stop. The hair that usually falls over his face flop backwards and brush against his neck. The angle is uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

"Begin gently pouring the water over him." Kitagawa instructs next, his tone altering from calm to icy as he refers to Ryuji; his first change in affect since they'd arrived, since they'd met, he's pretty sure.

"Uh... okay." Ryuji mumbles. He steps forward, closer to the stool until he's standing over him. From the angle his head is stuck in, Akira can see up the blond's nose. Brown eyes stare down at him though, so he closes his eyes, hoping to keep this is situation from getting anymore bizarre. He hopes that Takamaki and Morgana were making progress in their investigation; something to make this ordeal worth it.

He almost falls out when the first splatter of water hits him in the forehead. Recoiling from the unseen and sudden coolness. Ryuji doesn't say anything though, just keeps pouring splattering water onto his face as Kitagawa-san instructs. He keeps his eyes closed, but desperately wants to open them. The sensation is just too surreal. The droplets roll down his cheeks, through his hair and down the collar of his shirt. Soon enough, it starts cascading onto the floor, splashing loudly beneath the stool when his hair and face are completely soaked, Akira almost wishes he'd taken Kitagawa's advice, or at least stripped out of his now damp blazer before doing this.

He doubts he make an appealing picture anyway.

"We're outta water." Ryuji calls out after his neck has long since cramped into a sore mass of nerves.

Akira opens his eyes.
"Hm." Kitagawa says, "I believe we'll be done for today then, please see yourselves out."

Despite wanting nothing to do with this place, or at least that's how he feels about it, neither of them move.

"We uh, actually wanted to ask about your sensei before we left." Ryuji starts, surprisingly soft. Gentle even.

Kitagawa reacts by not reacting, ceasing all movement entirely. His dirty paintbrushes are still clenched in his hands, dripping with dark blues and languid purples. "Madarame-sensei? What would you want to know about him?" He too is gentle, even if Akira can see the tension coiling in his hands and wiggling, still-naked toes.

This is it.

"Well, there's been some people talkin' about him lately, how he abuses his students-" Ryuji's mild voice is interrupted by Kitagawa's booming one.

"That's preposterous!"

"Is it really?" Ryuji shouts back, his tact forgotten. He's shouting now too.

Akira pushes his glasses back onto his face, but remains as unobtrusive as possible.

"You live here, right? With that great sensei of yours?" Ryuji taunts. His face is red again.

"Of course, I do. Sensei took me in when there was nobody else to."

Ryuji's hands fly into the air, the watering can nearly collides with his head. "Then why's there's no food here, huh? There's nothin' in here but art supplies and dead rats!"

He shudders, and not just because of the yelling. Akira watches, though, as Kitagawa's passiveness falters, his anger slips away into more anger. His toes stop moving; he doesn't think he's seen a more hateful expression anyone's face before.

"Sensei took me in and raised me as his own," Kitagawa reiterates, his icy eyes are piercing into the man behind him. "And I am proud to be his pupil! Now get out of here before I contact the police!"

Akira's heart stops. He's on his feet before he realizes what he's doing, and runs out of the room and away from the shouting match that continues.

"There you are- woah!" Takamaki says to him when he reaches the first floor, but he brushes past her and out the door of Madarame's shack.

It takes him a long moment, when his vision starts fading to black in some parts, to realize that he hasn't been breathing since he'd ran past the overgrowth of Madarame's place. His throat is constricting painfully, his lungs are on fire, and all he feels is an overwhelming urgency to run. He recognizes the sound of his head hitting the pavement.

Everything turns off.

Chapter End Notes
I'd like to apologize for how long this chapter is, but we're still not in the palace lmao
I'm not much of an artist, but I do have my rendition of what I described Yusuke's
painting of on my blog.
Leave a review if you have the time, I enjoy reading them. :)


I must have fallen asleep... Is what pierces through the throbbing migraine he's waking up to when Sakamoto drips more water onto his face, though it felt more like splashing than the light, almost rain-like, drizzle that it had been before. Some of it courses into his nose and he jerks upwards on reflex.

At some point, he figures, he must have fallen out of the stool that Kitagawa had put him on.

"Oh, sorry." A voice says from above him, confirming that he had fallen or that Ryuji had grown even taller in the time he'd been asleep. Though the voice apologizing did not belong to Ryuji or even Kitagawa, tension floods through his shoulders and stomach forcing him to sit up fully erect. Akira blinks several times, then uses the hem of his blazer to dig under his glasses and the remainder of the water from his eyes. Finally, he can see, but everything is still blurry, and brighter than he remembers Kitagawa's art studio being.

"Woah, kid." The same voice says again, "Maybe you shouldn't get up so quickly."

"Akira-kun!" A voice says. One that he recognizes.

Akira glances away from the street they'd taken to get to Madarame's shack and towards the source of the voices he'd been hearing. In front of him was a woman he did not recognize, though her short haircut didn't make her more distinguished than any other stranger that he'd seen since starting his probation and the sunglasses perched in hair could have belonged to anyone. Her gaze, however, was latched onto him so intensely that she may as well have been touching him; something that a lot of adults in his life seemed to have mastered. Akira drops his own gaze without really meaning to, his head bobs towards the ground and sends flecks of water from his still damp hair onto the ground between them. The unfamiliar woman's hands are still half-extended towards him, in one of them, is a purple container with droplets of water hanging off of the edge.

It wasn't Sakamoto. He recognizes slowly.

It happened again. Akira adds on, not sure what he should be feeling, knowing that he'd fallen asleep in public yet again. Though, after recalling Kitagawa's cruel warning, he supposed it was more of a forced sleep than a consensual one. Not that it really mattered, he supposed.

Peering over the stranger's form, he spots Takamaki and Sakamoto standing near the stone fence that gated Madarame's house from the others. In Takamaki's crossed arms lies Morgana, who stares down at him with an unreadable expression. All of his teammates stare down at the two of them with unreadable expressions. He's not sure if that means he's safe or not with this stranger hovering over him.

"Everything okay? You're not seeing spots or anything are you?" The stranger asks again.

"O-oh, Akira-kun can't talk." Takamaki interjects.

For some reason, the phrasing makes him flush in embarrassment, more so when he chances a look at the stranger's face. The warmth in his face only serves to make the pounding in his skull worse.
"Can't talk... oh, alright then. Um, thumbs up for okay. Thumbs down for, I need a hospital, stat, big sister." The stranger requests with a laugh, setting down the bottle she'd just poured over his face to mimic her own instructions.

"Big sister..." He hears Ryuji murmur from near the fence.

Akira gives her a thumbs up without looking directly at her, but catches her nodding regardless.

"Great, well, your head is still bleeding, but besides that, emergency over!" The stranger says with a clap of her hands. She almost reminds him of Takemi, though in a far less dangerous capacity. though the way her hands clamp around the camera hanging from her neck makes him a bit on edge; more so than he'd been before he'd noticed it, anyway.

The noise makes him jerk in place.

"Now, I couldn't help but notice that you three were hanging out at Madarame's place! You don't seem like the ordinary fans that come around here, I don't think I've seen any of them get as far as you have, though you did come out in quite a rush." The stranger says, "Even so, I'm still interested in people that know Madarame's pupils."

"Madarame's pupils?" Both Morgana and Takamaki question, drawing the stranger's attention away from him.

The woman leans back, taking to her feet, so Akira does the same, ignoring the rather massive headache that makes his vision blur as he stands back up. Quietly, he scuttles towards his two teammates, getting rid of the attention that had, until just now, been focused solely on him.

"What d'ya know about him anyway?" Ryuji embarks.

"Him?" The stranger questions. Akira watches as the lady stands up on her tip-toes, as if to peer into the shack behind them, "As in only one?"

"Yep." Ryuji offers shortly.

"Why did you want to know about Madarame's pupils?" Takamaki questions, taking a step forwards.

This appears to please the woman, as she smiles directly at Takamaki and steps forward as well, "Well, there's this rumor going around about one of Madarame's most famous paintings, the Sayuri, saying that it had been stolen. People are actually saying that it was revenge against Madarame by a pupil of his. They say it happened because Madarame was being abusive towards them and that taking the painting was their retaliation. Have either of you heard anything about that?"

The lady looks between Takamaki and Sakamoto almost raptly, her gaze does not fall on him once as she glances between the two blondes. Normally, he wouldn't find it strange, but given that she'd just been kneeling over him, he finds it a bit peculiar.

"N-no, I haven't heard anything like that." Takamaki answers. The stranger turns her gaze fully onto Sakamoto.

"Nothin'." The blond drawls and nothing more.

The lady sighs, but is quick to re-equip her smile. Akira's not sure how she manages to go through so many expressions so quickly. She steps forward and digs through a bag attached to her waist until she pulls out a single business card.
"If you here anything about anything about Sayuri, let me know." She orders, all but thrusting the card towards Takamaki, who has no free hands. Instead, the stranger carefully places the card on Morgana's back. He yowls in protest.

She walks off with the same presence he'd woken up to, like being in a storm without a shelter. He shivers when she finally disappears around the corner, feeling relieved.

"That was strange." Takamaki says quietly.

Ryuji plucks the card from the nest of fur on Morgana's back and reads it out loud, "Ohya Ichiko. Journalist."

"That explains it, then." Takamaki comments with a sigh. "She's just looking to cause trouble."

"Still, she might be useful." Morgana advises from the cradle of her arms, "Maybe she has some information regarding Madarame's missing pupils."

Ryuji extends his hand towards him, then, the business card clasped between two of his fingers. "You call her then."

Morgana growls.

"I'm not sure if asking her will help us with anything." Takamaki interjects, "Besides, I think I found something that might help us with the last keyword."

Gently, Takamaki lowers Morgana towards the ground. Akira's not sure if he imagined the small whine that the cat had let out or not, but directs his attention in his other teammate's direction as she pulls her phone out of her pocket. For a few moments, she swipes across the screen then extends it towards them.

Akira steps beside Ryuji as the blond leans down towards the screen and does the same. On Takamaki's screen is a stack of documents. Some of them look crusted with age, with brown circles curling up the messy corners. None of it, at least to him, looks particularly relevant. Though his difficulty reading the small print may be the reason why.

Ryuji leans even closer, "What does this even say, 'Application for...' uh, a park?"

"It's for an art museum under Madaraime's name." Takamaki explains, swiping one way on the screen to show even more documents.

One of their phones, he's not sure which crackles loudly, then speaks in a harsh, robotic voice.

"Beginning Navigation."

Another wave of pain floods across his senses, though it's unlike any of the others he'd been having since waking up in front of Madaramae's shack. Akira grasps at his head, tugging on his hair to try and alleviate some of the tension building up across his skull but after a few moments of that, no relief comes, so he stops, letting his hands drop against his sides.

The darkness frightens him at first, and he can't help but think he might have gone blind for a moment before he catches flashes of color from just outside his peripheral. Cocking his head towards that side, he's assaulted with the brightest building he's ever seen. In front of them, where a disheveled looking building had been barely standing up was a massive, oddly shaped buildingked upon each other, all of them were taller and wider than he was and each of them were bright that might have taken up the entire street they'd just been standing on. Bricks upon bricks were stacked
and somehow more golden than the last formed the main structure of the building. Aside from that singular structure, Akira has a hard time naming the shapes of the other parts that seem to spring out of the construct like branches. Swirls of the same golden material twirl towards the sky, tearing through the black and blue clouds that hover above the place. A dome of glass, the only thing not completely gold, is attached at an awkward angle on the roof to one side of the enormous building; Akira couldn't help but wonder if he peered through it, he might find Kitagawa inside, hiding behind a canvas. Pillars of light shoot up from the ground and track back and forth across the sky, sending glares of light into his eyes as it flickers across some of the more shiny bricks that form the building. The beams intersected in the middle of the building where the bricks were most shiny and intersected across a grouping of words that stood stark against the building.

**Ichiryusai Madarame**

**Museum of the Gods**

The only thing that Akira recognizes from the world that had existed moments prior was the stone fence that had circled around Madarame's property. Only now was it several times taller than he was, even if they three of them stacked on top of each other, he doubted that they'd be able to scale it. And, as far as he could see, none of the overgrowth that was actually in Madarame's yard existed in this altered version of it. In the center of the stone walls, where the rusty fence had once sat, was now a blue toned archway that was packed with a line of what could only be hundreds of people. The line swerved around the corner of the fence and down the street, going on and on until Akira couldn't make out any of the individual figures anymore.

"We're in the MetaVerse?" Morgana's voice questions to his side, "I didn't even notice."

Akira glances around to look at his teammate is startled, more than he should be, to find that Morgana had taken up the form he'd first met him in. Confirming, if nothing else, that they'd traveled into the MetaVerse.

"So it was museum!" Takamaki- Panther- says. She sounds excited and her exposed back is traced into a smile.

Akira finds it unnerving. He still wished he'd been wrong.

"How'd you figure that out? Just from those papers?" Skull questions, his mask slips into place over the top part of his face with a glare from one of the light shining over Madarame's museum.

"Yeah, I was looking around the upstairs and one of the doors was locked, but the other was a bedroom. It was also locked, except the door didn't close all the way so I just walked inside. It looked like a bedroom, but there wasn't anything there besides a desk and tables." She adjusts her own mask, pulling away from her face and onto the top of her head, "Anyways, I went looking through the desk and I found a bunch of the papers I showed you guys. I took pictures of all of it so he wouldn't notice any of it was missing."

Skull nods, casting a yellow blur as the light shining onto his mask moves with the reflection. "That's kinda badass, like a real phantom thief!"

"Maybe... except for the part where I tripped as I was leaving, so I hope Madarame doesn't notice the hole in his shoji..." Panther admits quietly. In the blue glow of the MetaVerse's sky, Akira catches her cheeks lighting up until they're matching her outfit.

"You fell into the shoji?" Skull laughs. His black coated arms fold over the buckles on his stomach as he bends forward. He laughs some more.
"Shut up!" Fusses loudly. Her yell doesn't alert any of the shadows nor any of the countless people forming a line in front of them.

"The distortion in this place is thick." Morgana says next, drawing his attention once more, and talking as if he hadn't heard anything that had just been said. When he glances over again, Morgana isn't looking at him, but instead at the crowd of people that circled around and into the palace.

"How can you tell?" Panther inquires, stepping forward as if physically stepping into the next line of conversation.

"Look at the customers going around that wall, none of them have faces, but they all seem to be talking."

Akira took another glance at the line of people and, to Morgana's observation, he found that none of the people talking actually had mouths or a nose or eyes, yet seemed to be looking around and conversing with each other.

Or, more aptly put, the cognition of these faceless strangers speaking to each other. Like the case in Kamoshida's palace, he had a feeling that these people were nothing but fodder for Madarame's twisted desires.

"Never mind that, just look at that thing!" Skull calls out, lifting a yellow glove to point at the glowing, shining building in front of him.

The more he looked at it, the worse his head pounded against his skull. It truly was that disturbing. At least Kamoshida's palace had been easy- easier- on the eyes, excluding all of the tapestries and other things he'd rather forget.

"This is really Madarame's?" Skull pipes up, dragging him away from a road he'd rather not walk down again.

Panther speaks up next, "Doesn't it seem strange? Madarame's artwork is already in museums everywhere, why would he have a palace that looks like one, too?"

Distracted by its disturbing exterior, Akira really hadn't considered that himself. Madarame was already famous, with adoring fans that climbed over themselves just for his autograph, so it did seem strange that he'd have anything in his heart to distort after all; he had all he could want already.

"T'would seem not." Arsene's voice comes out as he flickers into being with a burst of azure flames. Another strange wave crackles across his brain, fortunately one of soothing relief rather than the painful ones he'd been having.

"Uh." Panther falters. He catches her glancing towards the presence lingering just behind him, then back at him. "What would seem not?"

"Greed." Arsene answers cryptically. Even Akira, who was mostly privy to what his persona was thinking and feeling wasn't sure what to make of the statement.

"Oh." Ryuji voices, "So he doesn't just want any museum or somethin'? He wants to own every museum?"

Arsene nods. Akira doesn't seem him do it, yet finds himself aware of the action without turning around to face his other half. It's an unusual experience, but not one he can describe.
"Well, it's not like it'll do us any good to speculate what's going in Madarame's head, especially when we're inside his heart." Morgana advises.

Panther steps between the small circle they'd unconsciously formed. "Is that really a good idea, I mean Akira- er, Joker is still bleeding and it wouldn't really be in our best interest to head in there without everyone being one-hundred percent!"

Akira runs his fingers around his head, ignoring his mask, and then pulls his hands in front of him. He jumps at first, forgetting that his gloves were already blood red to begin with, but spots an additional wet sheen coating his right hand. That, he supposed, might have explained some of the pain he'd been feeling since waking up.

"I'm fine." He tries to say, but forgets what company he's in, where nobody can really understand him. Of his three teammates, none of them are looking at him. Even if they'd understood what he'd been saying, they wouldn't have even seen it.

"That's true..." Morgana agrees with a nod, "Nice call, Panther."

"I'd be out of the job if my client were to get hurt on the job." Panther quips, laughing to herself.

Skull sighs, rubbing at his eyes between the gaps in his mask. "Did you really just say that?"

Akira doesn't get a chance to hear her response before the MetaNav is activated once more, sending them back into the real world. The first sensation he feels, aside from another wave of pain that pulses behind his eyes, is the peculiar sensation of his clothes changing material. The tight, leathery material that makes up his MetaVerse outfit is replaced with the less form-fitting trousers and suspenders that he'd been wearing just before.

Everything else that had been around him moments before faded with a bright light, including Arsene, who disappeared with the same ball of flame that he'd appeared with. The massive museum swirled in on itself, reforming the shack where Kitagawa was residing. The stone fence shrunk down until Akira could almost see over it if he stood on his tip-toes, the plants crept over the edges and the rusted gate winked into place all in the space of a few seconds. Sound came next, the chirping of birds and the far off roar of trains he couldn't see. His three teammates were replaced with two students that wore outfits that matched his, their faces blank of the masks they wore.

It all seemed so normal compared to what he'd just experienced.

Wiping at his face, Akira chipped off some of the drying blood and does his best to pressure the small gash at the edge of his hair line. He's not sure how he'd hit his head there of all place when he'd fallen, but can't do anything more about it until he can get somewhere with running water. Chancing a glance back up at the shack, he has a feeling that this isn't the place he needs to be.

"Hm. It's later than I thought it would be." Takamaki informs. "We should leave before any more reporters show up."

Together they head back to the station. He tries not to look too much into that. There's already a lot to think about without bringing up Takamaki's stalker. It's a quiet endeavor, which is something that makes him both nervous and relieved, the same feelings that described how it'd always been at home.

Once they were at the station, Takamaki drifts away from them as they approach one of the intersection between Ginza and Minato line.
"See you guys tomorrow!" She says cheerfully before setting Morgana down on the floor.

"Right." Ryuji says without looking in her direction. The blond is preoccupied with scooping his roommate into a bag Akira recognizes as his own.

He hadn't even realized he didn't have it with him until just now. In his panic, he'd forgotten all of his belongings in Kitagawa's studio.

Takamaki waves to him, turning her back to the flow of traffic to do so. He's pretty sure that's more hazardous than it's worth just to include him in her farewells. And unnecessary.

Akira waves back regardless.

"I got it." Ryuji says when Akira tries to reach for his bag.

Something in his stomach clenches when his teammate says that. He feels a bit guilty, then, but relents, even when the blond flips Morgana over his shoulder and carries him like he might a bag of garbage.

Morgana screams quietly, a piercing yowl that's drowned out in the masses around them. Even without the screen, Akira can see the panicked look in Morgana's eyes that tells him more than he needs to know. Still, Ryuji continues forward as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, like he hadn't just burdened himself with Akira's things even when he didn't have to.

The train to Yongen-Jaya was still the same gate away from whatever gate that Sakamoto went off to. He'd never asked which. Yet his teammate marched in front of him until they were in the station, far enough that if they went together any further, Ryuji would be taking the train to LeBlanc with him. Only then did the blond finally turn around and return him his belongings, as well as Morgana.

"See ya." Ryuji says, clapping a hand down on the shoulder that doesn't have Morgana hanging from it.

The contact rattles him, shaking down from his neck all the way to his knees. He's not sure whether to attribute it to the other boy's strength, of which he'd been a victim of to its fullest extent, or to Akira's own weakness, which he'd been saddled with since birth, or some strange combination of the two. Regardless, he finds himself readjusting his balance before he finally sees his teammate off. Unlike Takamaki, Ryuji doesn't turn his back to the stampede around him and thus, doesn't see when Akira raises a hand to offer his farewell.

"Let's get back to base so we can treat your wound." Morgana advises once more.

Nodding, Akira steps onto the next train headed towards Yongen-Jaya and refuses to let himself close his eyes for more than a few seconds lest some other, new stranger approach him and ask him for weird favors or pour water on him. His eyes are dry by the time he makes it back to LeBlanc, but he's able to avoid looking or talking to anyone, which he considers a victory. That changes when he takes his first step into the cafe. Instantly, eyes are on him. Just one pair, fortunately, though that doesn't stop that singular gaze from being any nerve-wracking than if it'd been a train full of people.

"You're late." Sakura-san says without preamble.

Akira's world freezes for a second. His heart beats over the sound of the TV on the far wall and something about that change in his hearing makes the smell of coffee and curry disappear completely.
"It's a joke." Sakura-san says in the next instant. The older man scrubs at the back of his head with one hand and casts a look towards the counter in front of him. "Kids these days..."

He's not sure how to respond to that, not entirely. In school, people didn't make jokes with him, though they didn't make jokes about him either, at least to his knowledge. Jokes were supposed to be laughed at, or in his case smiled at, yet Sakura-san's sense of humor sent chills racing up his spine while the rest of his chest tried to compress in on itself. All in all, he didn't feel like laughing, but he did his best to smile when Sakura-san glances back up at him.

"You eat yet?" Came next. Akira shakes his head silently and is promptly guided towards the bar when Sakura-san waves him over and pats the bar in front of him.

Quickly, a plate of curry is set in front of him, but also a new addition, a cup of steaming, dark liquid. He shouldn't find it strange, he was eating in a coffee shop after all, not to mention living in one. Despite that, he can't think of a particular instance in his entire life where he'd consumed the acrid smelling beverage. It was the second time that Sakura-san had done such a thing, yet the first that Akira finds himself intrigued by it. The first time could have easily been a mistake, one he doubted would happen again.

When he glances upwards, towards his guardian, he finds the man standing a few feet away, off to the side and counting money in the already empty cafe as if he just hadn't changed the pattern they'd set up since he'd arrived. Then again, it's not like Akira himself had been sticking to any particular schedule, never coming back to the cafe at the same time each night.

He sticks with the familiar first, drawing up a spoonful of curry, then a spoonful of rice until less than a portion of it remained. He stares at the beverage in between each bite, wondering if drinking something hot while eating hot food was wise or not. He'd never been served a hot beverage in his life, either, now that he thinks about it. On the contrary, Sakura-san, and his customer base, seemed to almost live by that rule.

Akira curls his fingers around the small handle, that too is warm, almost too hot to touch and wonders if he's just over-analyzing something that didn't require it. Lifting the cup to his mouth, he takes a whiff of it and his tongue curls back in his mouth on instinct. Like the smells that permeated through the floorboards and into the attic, and even into his clothing. Coffee was a bitter scent, even more so when it was right under his nose. Now that he was this close, however, he smelled other things as well, some sweetness, but it was mostly bitter; nearly the opposite of the curry that Sakura-san served, which was mostly sweet and partly spicy.

His first sip was underwhelming in flavor, but the opposite in sensation. It, as expected, was hot, but he hadn't expected it to burn against his tongue to the point he almost spit it out. His second sip, he decides, is minutes later, when the steam is nothing but a trickle towards the ceiling. It's still impossibly warm, managing to coat his mouth in heat in a way the curry can't do. Akira's pretty sure he starts sweating instantly, his body somehow heating up with the liquid. Now that it's finally manageable, he doesn't find anything in the taste that he particularly enjoys. Like the smell indicated, coffee was fairly bitter, but help some distant sweetness that might come more from the smell than any actual sugar.

Despite the burn on his tongue, he's not not a fan of it.

"It's a sophisticated drink." Arsene says so suddenly that Akira fumbles with the cup and saucer in front of him.

Akira glances towards his guardian, but quickly looks away when he finds that the older man isn't looking in his direction, as if he hadn't noticed he'd made any noise at all. Instead, he turns his head
down towards the coffee he'd nearly spilled and swirls the half full cup around in his hand. The brown liquid swirls like a miniature typhoon, still steaming a bit from the middle but otherwise looking completely mundane. Tracing his lips against the edge of the coffee cup's, Akira is struck with how warm the ceramic is against his skin as well as the most immediate aroma courses through his nose in the most pervasive manner possible. The warmth that boils through him is quite sensual he notices, after taking another, longer sip.

He can't quite recall a time he's been this warm, especially on the inside. It really is the most peculiar sensation.

By the time his cup is empty and placed back on the saucer beside his plate, Akira's almost wishes Sakura-san had given him a bigger cup, if only to analyze the bittersweet taste and not to relive his own unprecedented and visceral reaction to a beverage of all things.

Akira gathers his plate and cup and rinses the remains down the sink before taking a sponge to it, along with a small stack of other, identical looking dishes that had been harboring in the bottom of the sink. He has a feeling that Sakura-san would have asked him to do it anyway. While he's washing dishes, he can't help but roll his tongue around in his mouth, chasing after the remnants of the unusual combination that his guardian made a business out of.

Then there's a primal force pulling at the back of his head, grasping at his hair and Akira drops the sponge and cup that's in his hands. He doesn't react to the sound of the ceramic shattering, too caught up in the force on his head. Physically he's been yanked, but that sensation dulled in comparison to the complete and utter emptiness that tugs against his brain, that sends him back in time, away from Tokyo, further back than the trial, and dumps him into his bedroom at home.

"You have blood in your hair." Sakura-san's voice rumbles like a storm, shattering whatever had just happened.

Akira swallows, a loud uncomfortable sound, but doesn't say anything, sign language or not.

"You been getting in fights at school?" Is the next thing out of his caretaker's mouth.

His headache returns full force, a pounding, pulsing sensation. One like someone is stomping on his head repeatedly. He'd almost forgotten, in the man's charity, how much Sakura-san distrusted him.

Against the tug of fingers and matted blood in his hair, Akira turns off the sink and spins around where he's standing and glances up at his guardian before shaking his head.

A notepad is thrust into his hands, along with a pen. His phone is in his pocket, which would probably be easier on the both of them, yet under Sakura-san's intense look, he starts writing on one of the order sheets.

"I fell" He answers.

Past the rim of his glasses and the mess of hair covering his eyes, Akira catches Sakura-san frowning. The wrinkles on the older man's face curl together into hard lines.

"I thought I told you to call me if that happened." Sakura-san says, his voice hoarse where Akira had expected harsh and quiet where he'd expected loud.

Despite the expected reaction, Akira still flinches when his guardian says that. He'd all but forgotten that the older man had said that. And, if he's being honest, he'd thought that Sakura-san would have as well.
"Doesn't seem to be the case." Arsene murmurs, so suddenly again that it has Akira trembling in place as his other half interrupts the panicked monologue he'd developed in place of answering.

Instead of responding to Arsene, Akira finds himself apologizing, bowing in solace and filling the space between them with his bent over torso. He hopes that would be the end of it and Sakura-san would just send him back upstairs or make him clean something. In place of all that, the older man remains staring down at him with a sour expression that Akira can't get a read on no matter how many glances he keeps shooting upwards.

Sakura-san sighs just as Akira feels like he's about to his his threshold for awkward silence. The sound makes his head jerk upwards before he quickly looks away, hoping that whatever nightmare he'd fallen into would just end already.

"I need to know about this stuff, kid." Sakura-san says, still hoarse and still soft.

Akira would have preferred the yelling and the sinking feeling he felt when it happened. Instead, Sakura-san continued to defy his expectations of him. His stomach still sank, though it was accompanied by the weight of shame and humiliation that made his cheeks and eyes burn in tandem. Even if he hadn't forgotten what Sakura-san had said and had taken it seriously, part of him knows that he still wouldn't have called. That made the his face burn even worse. Not wanting to trouble his caretaker more than necessary and keep to himself, or at least that was what he'd been hoping for, had backfired right into his face, it seemed.

For a long moment, while Sakura-san remains a silent, towering statue over him, Akira thinks that this is it. That he's finally going to be kicked out and sent to jail. Surprisingly, the wave of strong emotions that is flooding his insides is not filled with fear. He thinks, maybe, that he's starting to become desensitized to thoughts of violating his probation. If only a little. Either that or his head injury was interfering more than he'd thought.

"Just... make sure it doesn't happen again." Sakura-san addresses, "Make sure you call or uh, texting message me when that happens, or we'll both end up in trouble, got it?"

Akira bobs his head, shocked, but trying to push these feelings back to wherever they came from.

"I'm gonna lock up, make sure you wash that gunk out of your hair before you go to school tomorrow."

Akira nods again, then Sakura-san steps away and twirls Leblanc's sign to closed. The older man's gaze flits over him from the other side of the door's glass and Akira feels those awkward feelings starting to build up again.

He heads into the attic and drops Morgana off, who doesn't budge from the bag when Akira deposits it on the edge of the mattress in the corner of the room.

Must be asleep. Akira thinks passively, stepping away from the bed.

Picking up clothes to sleep in, Akira heads downstairs once again. The key to LeBlanc is a heavy weight in his pocket, a reminder of sorts of the unusual scolding he'd just received. He makes sure the door is secured, tugging on the handle a few times, then spins around and heads into the opposite walkway.

The bathhouse, like the other times he'd been was nearing empty. He's not sure if, this time, it's due to the grey clouds starting to puff up around Yongen or if it was just due to how late it was. Either way, he was thankful for the lack of others. Offering up the pass that Sakura-san had given him,
yet another reminder, he stepped into the barren changing rooms and let out a sigh. Pressure that had been scaffolding upon itself since the day had started chipped away, just a little. The respite didn't stop him from glancing over his shoulder as he stripped off his clothes, though.

Naked, save for the towel, Akira steps into the room that separates the changing areas and the baths. He ducks into the first open stall around the corner and settles onto the stool without preamble. There's a long moment where he just sits there, staring at the white tiles opposite of him. There's nothing particularly vexing about them, but the blank wall in front of him invites him into a calmness he hadn't been expecting. It's not the same one he'd felt when he'd been scared that Sakura-san was going to kick him out, nor the relief that came when he walked to school. It was something entirely different, like he wasn't even himself anymore. He continues to stare at the wall, at the small tiles and the thick, white lines between them, trying to dissect this strange, new feeling he'd discovered.

Akira isn't sure how long he spends staring at the wall of the shower stall, he's just grateful that the place had remained empty while he zoned out. Being alone was another source of relief he felt in addition to the comforting torrent of water from above. Soap like tea leaves, much like Sakura-san's coffee, invaded his senses and left him feeling strange. The blood that had dried in his hair slithered down the drain just below his feet and left him feeling lighter, despite the stinging against, presumably, where he'd hit his head.

Alone, he scrubbed his legs and chest with one of the bathhouse's flannels, leaving him mostly pink, enough that the winding scars that curled around his stomach almost faded into nothing. That was a shocking sight, yet did nothing to interrupt the utter tranquility he'd been put under.

When he finally returns to LeBlanc, it had only just started raining, and the dull roar of it hitting the roof only added to that sensation. He'd never realized how good this type of isolation felt, even his parents, who'd only been so far away from him at any given point had never let him experience this type of freedom. With a sigh, and what he figures might be a creepy smile, Akira tugs Morgana out of his school bag and deposits him on the end of the bed. After that, he climbs in himself, careful not to disturb his roommate as he does so.

Almost instantly, he's caught in the sensation of falling as his back hits the mattress. That sensation continues for a long moment before he gasps awake breathlessly. The sound of rain had faded into nothing between one moment and the next, and the sudden change leaves his ears ringing. Opening his eyes, Akira is shocked to find the cafe's rafters missing, replaced with the flat, stony ceiling of the Velvet Room.

This place again... He recognizes as the shock starts to dwindle.

Adjusting the chain around his ankle, Akira carries himself towards the metal bars that separates him from the rest of the velvet room. Between his fingers, the metal bars are cold, almost icy, to the touch, yet he continues to grasp onto them for a reason he can't identify.

Justine and Caroline are standing in front of the door, already facing him as if they'd expected his arrival.

"I see you've begun infiltration on another palace." Igor's baritone voice echoes through the silence. Across the room, Akira can make out most of the man- if he truly was a man- sitting behind the simple, dark wood desk in the center of the chamber just beyond his cell. "And with that, another seal hath been broken. You and your compatriots are quite clever, trickster. I believe a reward is an order, but keep in mind that your bonds are still new, and easy to shatter. To harness the true power of the wild card, you must foster them to their fullest potential."
The compliment, if it was one, doesn't spark anything inside of him. That is until Igor raises a gloved hand and snaps two of his ivory fingers together. Instantly, what hadn't been coated in shades of blue and azure is instantly transfixed that way and when Akira blinks a few times, it remains that way, no matter what he does to deactivate the thief vision.

Twisting down from his chest, the translucent line- and the only thing that remains not blue- that connects him to the man on the other side of the room pulses with a small flash. It's not enough to blind him, but it does draw his attention as the connection pulses with energy as it grows slightly larger.

Igor snaps his fingers again, and his vision fades back to normal.

Rubbing at his eyes, Akira half-listens as the man continues to speak.

"As for the next order of business, I believe you are worthy of a new assignment. It is one that will, no doubt, help you in your most prevalent tribulation, indeed. Of course, it is not mandatory to complete it, but it will serve you no detriment to finish it." He glances up, just in time to see Igor wave a hand towards the two wardens in front of the gate between them.

Justine steps forward, and glances down, with her single eye, to flick through the papers attached to her clipboard. "Your objective, inmate, is to gather and produce the mask we specify."

Caroline steps forward as well, "Just show up here once you've got it, we'll know." She says cryptically, her own eye flashing the same blue that had clouded his vision before.

"In return, we, the holders of strength, will forge a bond with you, to assist you further in your rehabilitation." Justine continues over the sound of tearing paper.

She flicks it in his direction and Akira watches as it flutters like a cherry blossom and lands just on the other side of his cage. Releasing his grip on the bars, he bends over to retrieve it and studies it for a moment.

The paper itself is almost golden, but glows white under the room's ever present blue glow. On the parchment is a roundish figure with dark, crooked ears that stick straight up. His face is oval shaped with a smile as crooked as his ears. Underneath, in small, thin cursive is, presumably, its name.

"Jack Frost"

"That's his first trial, Justine?" Caroline scoffs, glancing at the paper in his hands as if she could see through it. "That's hardly a challenge!"

"It is what is written, and that's what we shall receive." Justine responds back without looking up.

"A sickening creature." Arsene mumbles from within, though Akira pays him no mind at the moment.

"With those matters dealt with, I shall now return you to your own realm. Do not take too long to complete your tasks, trickster, or ruin will be sure to come." Igor warns.

The mysterious man waves his gloved hand once again and Akira is cast back into shadow. It doesn't last as he'd like, in fact, it feels as if he's only just closed his eyes before the sound of rain splatter forces him into consciousness, then the smell of curry and coffee hit him as well. His alarm goes off seconds after he opens his eyes and he turns it off in the next moment, feeling exhausted despite the hours of sleep he'd apparently gotten.
His school uniform is wrinkled from where he'd forgotten to hang it up, but otherwise clean, save for the yellow specks of pollen stuck on his trousers that refuses to come off no matter how many times he shakes them.

Exiting the cafe's bathroom, Akira heads back upstairs and finds that Morgana had finally woken up, though looked equally as tired as Akira felt. The feline slumped over the edge of the bed, but his ocean blue eyes were peering slits towards the stairs as Akira climbed up them.

"Morning, Joker." He greets with a yawn, exposing his sharp teeth and pink tongue.

Akira nods in greeting before crossing the attic and picking up both his phone and his school bag. He offers the latter to his roommate, who climbs over the canvas lip gingerly and curls down inside. Akira has a feeling he's going to be asleep by the time they make it to the station.

Sakura-san stops him by the door by throwing something in his direction just as he's about to head out. The object smacks against the cafe's glass door and makes him jump before it clatters on the ground.

"Heads up." Sakura-san says mildly from behind the cafe's counter.

Akira picks up the object, a collapsible, black umbrella.

He turns around to offer his thanks, only to find that his guardian had disappeared around the corner and into the cafe's kitchen. Reminding himself to thank the older man later, Akira heads out into the rain, careful to keep Morgana under the brunt of the shield, along with his school supplies.

Unlike the day prior, Sakamoto is not waiting just outside of the school gate when he arrives, nor is Takamaki in the classroom and seated before he is. The latter barely manages to take her seat before the bell rings and Akira can't help but wonder if he's done something wrong before he remembers that he'd been the one to suggest this situation.

Silently, he listens to Ushimaru-sensei's monotone lecture over the importance of Northern Kyushu's name change and its influence on the economic disparities of the region.

Akira has a difficult time taking an interest in the subject, especially when his phone begins to vibrate.

"How's your head, Akira-kun, I forgot to ask when I came in." Takamaki questions.

"Yeah, are you good enough to head into Madarame's palace?" Ryuji chimes in, just before lunch.

"Don't rush him, Ryuji!" She scolds.

"I think so." He sends back after heading to the rooftop. Part of him is unsure of heading into another palace. His the scrape on his leg still isn't fully healed and the back of his head still throbbed in pain from yesterday's fall, yet part of him thinks of Suzui, then of Takamaki's conviction, and he knows he has to do this for their group, if not solely to stop Madarame and to help Kitagawa-san.

"Awesome! Let's group up at the walkway right off central street then!" Sakamoto says in their last period.

Akira informs Morgana of their infiltration plans and heads towards the station. He doesn't say anything about his doubts though. Akira keeps those to himself.
With a frown, he glances up at the second-level window of Madarame's shack just before it swirls into its MetaVerse counterpart, wondering if he could catch a glimpse of the artist beyond.

He doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: We actually infiltrate the palace.
Leave a review if you are so inclined, apologizes, once again, for the lateness of this update. I should be more free in the coming weeks.
For the second time, Akira was staring at the large, looming wall of what should have been a crackling stone fence that was barely taller than he was. Just like last time, there was a line of people curling out of the hole where the gate should have been and on the other side of that endless line was where they were lurking, right across the street from where Madarame's shack was out of fear of being spotted by Kitagawa and having the police actually called on them. To his side, a glowing blue gate pillared through the darkness they were hiding in. Something, apparently, he could notice but his teammates could not. Now that he knew what it was, he felt no desire to approach it, he'd been to that world just last night.

"Huh." Skull exclaims softly.

"Something wrong, Ryuj- er, Skull?" Panther questions, turning away from whatever she'd been staring at.

Akira catches a glimpse of Skull smiling brightly, his teeth like a miniature spotlight in the darkness they've covered themselves in.

"Ain't a museum like, a must for phantom thieves?" He questions.

Mona steps forward, standing between the three of them on two legs. "Well, it is important for a real phantom thief to know the difference between an original and a fake, but I don't think this is really the right place for a lesson like that."

"Doubled." Panther evokes.

Skull shrugs, then takes a step forward, breaking the pattern they'd stepped into and points towards the entrance of the building with a yellowed hand, "Anyways, how're we gonna get in there? Looks like all of those guys have tickets or somethin'."

"It's not like we can go through the front anyway, not without alerting all of those guards and Madarame as well, most likely." Morgana advises.

"So you think we should go around back then?" Panther questions.

"Or up." Morgana says simply before walking towards one corner of the large wall.

Akira is hesitant to approach. Kitagawa's threat from the previous day hangs over him like a physical weight, but when he finally works up the courage, the other three are already there and talking.

"-It looks like where's less shadows on this side than over there." Morgana's voice filters through once he's close enough to hear it. "So if we scale up this wall then we shouldn't be detected."

"Not that isn't a great plan and all, but uh, how exactly are we supposed to get up there?" Skull entreats, his silver mask tilting up to gaze straight up at the near endless wall.
From this close, it looks like the wall shoots straight up into the sky and never ends.

"Allow me." Arsene's voice erupts, but not from inside. Something he can only tell by the way his ears start to vibrate.

The same burst of flame erupts over his shoulder and Akira turns around just in time to catch his other half flicker into being with a rattle of chains. A gust of air floods heavily against his face, tousling his hair and flapping the heavy coat that surrounds him. Arsene looks the same as the last time Akira had seen him, an incredibly tall figure half made of shadows and fire and dressed up in decadent clothing that covers his unusual form. Long claws, also made of absolute darkness, hang where his hands should be and dark, still rattling chains hang from around his shoulders and waist.

Without another word, Arsene advances towards him, breaking the already meager space between them with another gust of wind. Akira clenches his eyes shut, expecting the worst, and is then hyper-sensitive to the feeling of Arsene's would-be hands curling around his sternum and under his knees. Then, yet another gust of wind from above is pushing down on him. Akira, for the life of him, can't describe what's going on around him, but he refuses to open his eyes until Arsene's voice erupts once more.

"We are here." His persona says simply. The wind stills, from violent into nothing in no time at all.

Akira forces himself to look beyond his mask, and sees Madarame's museum from above. The sight bobs as Arsene does, swaying back and forth as if affecting by a breeze that Akira can't comprehend. When he chances a glance downwards, Akira is surprised to find the top of the wall just below his feet and, without him having to think or ask, Arsene's shadowy grip loosens on him and he's standing on the wall that had been looming over them.

"Joker!" Mona exclaims to his side, also having had scaled the building, though Akira doesn't spot Morgana's persona at all. "Did your persona really fly you all the way up here?"

Akira glances towards Arsene, who floats just behind him. The other half of him merely shrugs, a surprisingly human gesture for one who looks so un-human.

The appearance of his other teammate, also without their persona, from the same direction as Morgana has him questioning if he was really as like them as he thought they were.

"Dude!" Skull crows out, another smile on his face, "That was awesome! I tried asking Captain Kidd the same thing after I saw that, an' you know what he said? A big fat nope. Then Mona-Mona pulled out this grappling hook thing and well, it looks a lot easier in the movies."

Panther doesn't say anything as her crimson mask and yellow hair peeks out from one side of the wall, but, after another moment of hesitation in which he glances towards his other two teammates, who are talking in low tones to each other, Akira steps over quickly to help her up once she starts struggling to vault over the edge of the wall. Weak as he is, Panther grabs onto his hand without hesitation, and he still manages to help her up. She smiles from underneath her mask when she finally stands back up.

"At least someone is a gentleman around here." She comments lowly as she approaches the other end of the wall. Akira follows behind her and stares off towards the museum.

He's never been this high up before. Is the first thought that he's able to process. Then he looks downwards and feels his stomach to drop out from underneath him, he steps a little further back from the edge.
"Hm, there's more guards over here than I thought." Morgana surmises. Akira glances towards his feline teammate, who's staring straight down at the ground below them, and notes that he doesn't appear conscious of the height change at all, nor does he look as nervous as Akira feels at all. He wonders if that was a cat-turned-human thing, or if Morgana was simply less frightful than Akira himself was.

"Should we get rid of them?" Ryuji questions with a sinister expression.

Morgana shakes his massive head, "This place is huge, it'll take forever to find the treasure if we aren't careful; we should avoid any unnecessary battles until we find out just how big this place really is..." Morgana trails off, then stares towards him, "Uh- I mean, but we should do whatever Joker thinks is the right call, he's our leader after all."

"Oh yeah!" Skull says, also looking towards him.

His chest seizes up like a vice grip, having been put on the spot so suddenly. Akira pulls his phone out from the confines of his coat's pocket and quickly types up his panicked answer.

"What Mona said." He instructs, feeling rather stupid. Even more so when it's Mona's turn to read it and his teammate glares at him.

"It looks like we can jump onto the arch from here." Panther observes, pointing just below them where a series of massive, white torii gates begins. Akira can't tell where the trail actually ends, but he does spot one sticking out from behind the museum they're supposed to be breaking into.

Mona jumps first, before they can finish talking, then advances onto the next just as Skull ejects himself from the top of the wall, Akira catches Sakamoto grasping at his knee and the sight makes his stomach sink all over again.

Panther jumps next, leaving him behind without a word as she falls through the air and lands at Ryuji's side. The two of them talk for a moment, before they both stand back up and continue jumping across the torii as if they were crossing a sidewalk.

"Breathing is important." Arsene points out and Akira sucks in a huge gulp of air before he, too, thrusts himself from the, relative, safety of the museum's wall. Falling gave him the same feeling as flying, strong wind pushing at his clothes and hair, making it impossible to move his arms and legs, then it all stops as he comes into contact with the ground below him. In truth, it hadn't been that bad. It could have ended up a lot worse, which could aptly describe most situations he's had in the MetaVerse thus far, he supposes. The jump after that one is much easier, though no less stress inducing. His body slices through the air with a grace he can't possibly possess and he knows that Arsene, or perhaps the MetaVerse as a whole, has something to do with it. By himself, Akira couldn't even chase after a cat without falling and hurting himself.

The number of gates ahead started to dwindle before Mona stopped moving all together. His teammate glanced up once again and Akira watches as he pulled something from the pouches around his waist.

"We should be able to get to the roof from this way." Akira hears in a whisper before Morgana throws a metal barb towards the edge of the roof.

The barb clatters onto the concrete beneath them, drawing the attention of a shadow. The guard shines a flashlight on the ground where the noise had originated but finds nothing as Mona reels it back quickly. The second attempt yields the same result, the same clatter, only this time the noise attracts more guards that search out the area beneath them.
"For fuck's sake." Skull mutters, jumping forward until he's on the same arch as Mona. Yellow fingers tug the device from his unusual appendage. The same hand reels back, over his shoulder, then shoots forward in a motion that makes Akira's insides clench in pain. He rubs at his arm as the device latches onto the lip of the museum's roof. He'd thought he'd forgotten all about that particular incident. He's already forgiven Ryuji, neither of them had really been at fault, yet part of him refused to not feel pain whenever Skull mirrored how he did then. The pain faded just as quickly as it had come, and Akira joined Panther as she jumped onto the next gate.

"My paw slipped, that's all!" Mona exclaims in a harsh whisper. The cat tugs twice on the rope that had been attached to the metal barb that Skull had just thrown then pulls another piece of metal out of one of his pouches and loops the rope around it. Once the knot is tight enough that his teammate is satisfied with it, he lowers to the ground and the sharp, pointed end of the device sinks into the ground as if it had a will of its own. The ground ripples like it had been made of water and part of the rope sinks into it as well. Mona stands back up and tugs on the taut line of rope that connected the torii gate to the roof of Madarame's museum.

Without another word, Mona curls his form over the rope and starts scooting towards the other end. Panther and Skull join once their other teammate is far enough along the rope for there to be room for them and Akira watches, curious and confused, before he moves to mimic them as well, throwing one leg over the rope before joining his ankles together.

Akira had never climbed anything in his life, much less a rope, and found it rather difficult to navigate the smooth material of his boots from sliding against each other to prevent them from breaking apart and causing him to fall off. Eventually, though, he managed to make it to the top before someone grabbed him from underneath his shoulders and drag him onto the flat top of the roof. Once he's steady on his feet, yellow hands pull away from him and Akira offers his thanks in a quick gesture. Skull waves him off with a smile. It leaves Akira feeling even worse about the phantom sensation he'd had just moments ago.

Together, the four of them advance across the roof and gaze inside of the skylights, hoping to discover the treasure's location without having to engage in shadows at all, but don't spot anything that looks out of the ordinary from above. They reach the other end of the roof, where the off-kilter dome was that Akira had spotted the day before, without locating the treasure. The dome itself is made of panes of glass that all open outwards, providing the museum ventilation and, for them, at Mona's suggestion, a way inside. Morgana locks another metal barb around the frame of the window and throws the rope inside before turning towards the three of them.

"Once we're inside, we need to make sure not to draw attention to ourselves, we don't know how strong the enemy is. And be careful not to touch anything, who knows where Madarame could have placed a trap." He analyzes, gazing between the three of them.

Akira nods in agreement. Not many people noticed him anyways.

Except for Sakamoto and Takamaki... He amends, glancing between his other two teammates.

Sliding down a rope is much easier than ascending one, though it leaves him open to a different sort of problem where he runs the risk of falling on his teammates if his grip slips at all. Fortunately, the other three are faster than he is at the exercise, swiftly coiling down the rope and landing on the museum's floor without much noise. Akira is less graceful with his descent, he's sure of it, though he has no way of knowing for sure, and lands on the tile below with an audible crack as his heels connect with the ground. Once he's grounded, he glances around the room they'd rappelled into to see if anyone had heard, but finds the area around them strangely blank, save for the paintings that line one wall. Unlike the outside, which had been so blindingly bright and
The interior of Madarame's palace is made of white walls so tall that shadows start to curl down from the ceiling where the light doesn't quite reach.

In addition to being blank, the room they landed in was also astoundingly quiet. Unnervingly so; he hadn't noticed before how much noise that the crowd outside actually made until he could no longer hear it.

The room they're in opens up into another room, one that more accurately depicts the exhibit that Madarame's art was at. Large square panels split the room into many awkward pieces, folding together at awkward angles that are hard to hide behind, like the last room, only paintings occupy the room and while their eyes seem to stare down at him as he sneaks from one corner to the next, the room seems unoccupied, even when he takes in a deep breath and manages to activate his thief vision.

The room after that is very much the same, but when he glances up at one of the paintings that occupies the walls, he doesn't expect to recognize the face that's locked inside of the frame.

_Nakanohara..._ He recognizes with a dull horror as he approaches the massive painting that's taking up a large portion of the wall. The man is painted in the dark suit, identical to the one his shadow had been wearing moments before his entire form had shredded in on itself and attacked them. His hair is dark and well-kept, so unlike Akira's own that it's strange to find any similarities between them. His eyes, however, lack the golden ring that they had in Mementos and they are, instead, painted in with a shade so dark that Akira feels himself sinking into his gaze the longer he stares. His expression is sad and depressing to look at, his cheeks are sunken in and the bones in his face stick out sharply against his skin.

Akira lifts a hand and presses the same spots against his own features. His cheeks, too, are sunken in and the bones just above them are sharp to the touch, even through the gloves coating his hands.

If his hair were any neater, or Nakanohara's any messier, they could maybe look similar enough to confuse with one another. Though Akira had to wonder if he, like Nakanohara, ever bore an expression that is capable of welling such sadness within another person.

"Isn't that the guy from Mementos?" Skull asks, pulling him away from Nakanohara's gaze and his thoughts as well. Sobering up, he glances towards his teammate, who had managed to appear at his side without being heard or seen.

Akira nods, though he doesn't have to as Panther is quick to walk up to the painting and confirm Nakanohara's name just underneath it.

"He looks so sad," Panther comments, "They all do."

Out of the four of them, nobody has a reply to that, Akira least of all.

Akira pushes forwards, but is stopped, yet again, by a familiar face.

Kitagawa is on the wall. His face sunken and his eyes dark, though dressed in clothes Akira had never seen him in before. His mouth is curved in a harsh frown and, just like Nakanohara, fills him with such encompassing sadness that Akira can't glance away from the frame in front of him, no matter how much he wants to rend this moment from his memory. The frame that encompasses his form is even larger than Nakanohara's, taking up an entire wall of the room they've walked into and casting Kitagawa's features into a looming figure of blacks and purples that seem to sway under Akira's gaze.
"That's Kitagawa-kun!" Panther points out, though she still runs up to the small, golden plaque just underneath Kitagawa's frame just as if to double check. "January twenty-eighth to 'blank'. Nakanohara had two under his name, does that mean something?" She asks, turning towards the three of them.

"Sounds kinda like a grave, doesn't it? Birthday and date of death" Skull suggests.

"Yeah, but Nakanohara is alive still, and the second date for him is long before we'd even became phantom thieves."

"So something else then..." Morgana agrees.

_Not birth and death... then something else..._

"Death is not exclusive to the act of dying." Arsene assures from within, though Akira finds the statement more cryptic than helpful.

_Exclusive to death... The end then? In his head, it all snaps together and he tugs out his phone._

"Working with Madarame." Akira throws out.

"That makes sense for Nakanohara's dates, but Kitagawa's are from almost as long ago." Panther counters, "But Kitagawa-kun's go back just as long."

"Ain't he the same age as us though, he said he was a second-year." Skull says, handing back his phone.

"So we're wrong about this or Madarame's had him since he was born or right after..." Panther looks at the plaque again.

"Explains why he's so fucked up in the head, at least." Skull murmurs with a snort.

"...All of these people, then," Panther starts in place of a response, "Were Madarame's pupils? All of them?" Panther wonders. Akira finds it hard to conceptualize. Madarame was hardly young, but he's certain they'd passed over a hundred paintings before stumbling onto Nakanohara and Kitagawa, perhaps even more; he had no intention to count just how many lives that Madarame impacted, good or bad.

"We should keep going..." Mona suggests quietly, already peering around the corner of the room just beyond the one they're standing in.

Akira steps behind him, gazing into the next room himself. Again, there's no guards or cognitive people. Only them and no paintings. In the center of the room is a large circular desk which blocks the room into two, almost equal spaces. There are various shelves across the walls and panes of glass embedded between them that are too opaque to serve as windows. If he had to guess, the room was a receptionist area of sorts, though he's not sure if a museum, especially a cognitive one, would need such a space.

"Wait a second, Joker." Mona pipes up, stopping him in his tracks. Akira glances down at him, then up at the room, wondering if Morgana had seen something that he hadn't. The cat scuttles forward quietly, his blade not drawn, and approaches an empty desk. In front of it, where Mona stops, is a rack with thick stacks of folded up pamphlets. Each of them is colored in a golden sheen that matched the outside of the museum.

"It's a map!" Mona whispers out to him, pulling one from the rack and sending the rest scattering to
the floor. Glancing in either way, Akira crosses the room, his other two teammates just behind him, and leans down as Mona pulls open the blindingly bright piece of paper.

"It's much smaller on paper." Panther observes.

"Why'd he bother thinking something like this up? It's his palace, why would he need a map?" Skull questions over her quite loudly, then even louder, "Don't suppose the treasure is somewhere on there?"

"Be quiet!" Mona hisses glaring in Skull's direction before looking back down at the map. Turning the paper around, then back over, he looks up at them and shakes his head, "I don't think this is the only map. This museum definitely has more than one floor."

Folding up the map until it resembles a small, golden brick, Mona hands extends the map to him and Akira hesitates for a moment before accepting it and tucking into his pocket.

The room beyond that one is even more different than the last. Like the previous one, there are no paintings governing the walls. In spite of this, the walls are anything but blank, taking on the same blinding radiance that the map in his pocket has. Within that gilded coating is a motif of nature that spreads across the room and arches up as the crescent staircases on either side of the room do. Even more gallant than that, is the sparkling, golden statue that begins on the floor in front of them, directly in the center of the room. Its base takes up as much space as the four of them do, but spirals outwards in a wide, glistening arc, resembling water moving through a river. The statue's curves are uneven as splashes of the same gold material bubble out of it, disrupting its water-like texture with shapes that resemble humans. The statue climbs towards the ceiling equaling the circumference of the circular room as it grows nearer to the darkened ceiling. The entirety of the statue makes the shape of a whirlpool, though he has no idea if it's going upwards or downwards.

*Creepy.* He thinks, taking in the lifelike figures that seem to be caught in the spiral. Instead, like Takamaki had done before, he approaches it, crouching under a small line of ropes that surround the base of the statues, and reads the small, golden plaque that is attached the base of the statue.

**The Infinite Spring**

**Madarame Ichiryusai**

The words are etched into the golden plaque boldly but neatly, the same typescript that had been under Nakanohara's and Kitagwa's portraits.

Panther voice calls out suddenly, startling him and when he turns around he finds her standing just beyond the ropes he'd climbed under, face half obscured by yet another plaque.

"A conglomerate work of art that the great director Madarame created with his own funds. These individuals must offer their ideas to the director for the rest of their lives. Those who cannot do so are not worthy of living." Her voice trembles through the last clause, though Akira isn't sure whether it's sadness or rage that compelled her. "This is what he thinks about stealing his student's work... isn't it?"

Akira catches a glimpse of Takamaki's mask as it tilts back, most likely staring upwards into the golden vortex.

"In other words, his pupils are like his property." Mona observes. "He's stealing ideas from talented artists in exchange for securing their livelihoods. And if they can't fulfill their end of the deal, Madarame gets rid of them."
"That sounds familiar." Skull comments in return. His boot catches on one of the rope stands surrounding the statue and it topples to the ground with a clatter.

Akira's surprised that no shadows show up from the noise.

"So those paintings out there." Panther says suddenly, "That's how Madarame thinks of Kitagawa-kun? A decoration?"

Nodding, Mona continues fiercely, "That confirms it then. It's safe to say that Madarame's distortion is a danger to those under him. With that being the case..."

The cat turns to him suddenly, staring him down with large, ocean blue eyes.

"What do you think, Joker, is all of this enough to make Madarame our target?"

He's hesitant to answer, suddenly flummoxed from the intense attention. Nobody ever looks at him, especially like Morgana was, and he was definitely not the one to ask about what someone should or shouldn't do. Until he'd seen the shack for himself, Akira was hesitant to even consider the possibility that Madarame might be a bad person; he'd looked kindly. There were no harsh looks shot in Kitagawa's direction. No bruises on him that Akira could see. Kitagawa acted nothing like he did, or like Takamaki or Suzui. Yet, in front of him right now, was proof enough of what Madarame actually thought, how he actually viewed the people around him. Kitagawa wasn't worth yelling at or beating, Madarame just left him alone in that place until he fulfilled his purpose; to the man who's heart they were in, Kitagawa wasn't a person at all.

Panther stepped around the plaque that had been hiding her face and looked at him too, and when Akira shoots a glance towards his other teammate, Skull is doing the same.

Three people staring at him, forcing him to make a decision. He admits, it should be an easy one. Madarame was a bad person, the statue before them and the palace around them was proof enough of that. Yet, Kitagawa was adamant about Madarame being the model teacher for him, that the older man couldn't possibly be like what his heart displayed to them.

Akira nods as firmly as he can. His agreement doesn't fill him with the same underlying satisfaction that he'd had when agreeing with Sakamoto to deal with Kamoshida. Compared to him, Madarame was his opposite. Unlike Kamoshida, Madarame never caused direct harm, as far as he could tell, anyways. He was absent in a way that left Kitagawa, and his other pupils, stranded and starving. It's an existence that is painful without pain. Akira would be lying if he didn't admit that he has a tough time wrapping his head around the concept.

Mona smiles vaguely at him, then nods as well. "Excellent decision. Now, our first step is to secure an infiltration route to the treasure."

"Our first official mission!" Skull crows a bit too loudly, though that too doesn't seem to draw any guards into the area. Mona hisses at him regardless.

Together, they scale up the crescent staircase, taking care not to touch the golden statue that arches through the walkway. There's a set of doors at the top that slide open quietly when Akira pushes at them and he's able to glance in the corridor just beyond it. That space is also devoid of shadows, guards or the cognitive customers that had been lingering outside; he's not sure if it's more or less comforting that they seem to be completely alone. Regardless of that, he moves slowly and as quietly as he can as he advances down the hallway, and glances over his shoulder several times in the process, just to be sure.
There's another room at the end of the corridor just before it bends off into another, equally long walkway, which is equally as dark and devoid of life than the one they'd just sneak through. Nervously, he pushes it open and is hit with a pungent smell that makes him stumble backwards for a moment. Then, just as quickly as it had incapacitated him, the odor is completely gone.

"Did you guys just smell paint?" Skull questions, just as the room beyond the door flickers like lightning. The dark space is replaced with brightness, and the smell returns, which he recognizes as paint now that Skull had put into his mind; it was the same smell that had hit him in the face when he was climbing up the stairs to Kitagawa's studio. The floors, too, resembled that space too, flecked in different colors of paint.

"It's a low-cognition room!" Mona says, scooting around his legs and stepping fully into the room.

"Low cognition?" Panther questions, stepping in with the three of them.

Akira secures the door, letting it click shut as he joins his team towards the center of the room.

"I remember you talkin' about that! It's like, a room that the palace doesn't think is important or whatever. Like a bathroom." Skull offers loudly.

Mona doesn't shush him and instead, to him, offers, "You should mark this room down on the map, Joker. It'll definitely be useful information to have."

He's not sure, exactly, where they are on the map, nor does he have anything to write with, but when the four of them pull away from the entrance to the low-cognition room, Akira does his best to commit the rooms placement to memory. Though the entire map seems rather pointless once they reach the other end of the corridor and are greeted with another set of stairs that isn't indicated on the map.

At the top of the stairs, Akira stops in his tracks when he spots a security station. That, if nothing else, would definitely indicate guards in the area, but when he sneaks towards the glass doors that separate the station from the corridor and glances inside, the room is completely empty, except for a surprising amount of screens. He thinks back to what Skull had said earlier, about the pointlessness of a map inside of Madarame's own palace and wonders briefly just how much like a museum the place actually was; how much thought that went into developing it until it became all but real.

The doors to the security station refuse to open and Akira figures that's enough for them to keep going, made even further evident when Morgana bolts forwards into the expansive room just beyond. It appears to be a gallery room, much like the ones downstairs, except with far less paintings taking up space, and instead of dividers, the room is fairly open, drawing attention to the singular pillar in the center of the room. The pillar is rather plain looking, made of a pale stone that curls into a perfect circle then tapers outwards to create a square-based pedestal. On top of that pedestal is an eye-catching piece of art; a solid gold vase. He's not sure what about it drawing his attention, like other things in Madarame's palace, it is excessively shiny and glitters under the multitude of spotlights shining upon it. Within this cognitive place, it doesn't look out of place, even with its positioning, yet he still can't quite shake the feeling that it isn't all it seems to be. It seems to wobble in place, like it's made of water, or something gelatinous, despite remaining completely still.

Before Akira can express his unease, or whatever this feeling might be, Mona jumps onto the display, landing just beside the vase and presses his paws against it with a rapturously loud purr.

All at once, the room that had been oddly vacant shutters into sections with a buzz of alarm that
causes his entire body to vibrate. In front of him, and around his teammates, the floor fissures open and long strips of metal fill the space the floor had just occupied. Panther, who'd been following Morgana closely and Skull, who'd been following her, are splintered apart from each other as beams of crimson light pierce upwards from the metal that had sprung up from the ground. Morgana, who'd been in the center of it all, is caged inside walls upon walls of the red curtains that the lasers formed.

"U-uhm..." Skull's trembles out from in front of him as he reaches outwards. His yellowed fingers graze against one of the beams, only for him to recoil with a curse. Akira catches a glimpse of smoke shooting from his teammate's hand before it's stuck in his mouth.

"Lasers?!" Panther questions. She turns around in the small square she's been trapped in, most likely looking for a way out while Akira just watches. He hadn't been trapped, yet he feels unable to move.

"W-what?" Mona calls out, finally coming to his senses. His oblong head shakes back and forth for a moment before he speaks again, "A trap?"

"Yeah, a trap!" Skull shoots back from around the finger in his mouth, "Weren't you the one to tell us not to touch nothin'?""

"Akira's free, though!" Panther points out before Morgana can open his mouth. Then, all at once, three sets of eyes are staring at him again. His heart beats a lot faster because of it and he shoots his gaze towards the ground instinctively.

"Find us a way out, dude, before this cat sets off anything else." Skull orders, shooting a look at their feline teammate.

"S-sorry." Mona offers. "There should be a panel or s-something?"

Akira shoots a glance around the room, then back at the security station that they had just passed. If he had to take a guess, the solution to this would be in there, but without a key or a battering ram, he had no way of getting inside. That doesn't really leave him with many options outside of scoping the room their stuck in to look for a key or something equally as useful.

He'd be lying if he didn't admit it, but he felt rather isolated at the moment, even with his teammates still in the same room as him and watching his every move. Yet, as he circled around the perimeter of the place, looking for panels like Mona had suggested, Akira couldn't help but feel like he'd been cast off into a strange land, alone, for the second time in less than a year. In addition to that, he couldn't find a single thing in the room that would deactivate the trap that had been sprung, even with his thief vision.

There was, however, a second floor to the room that he hadn't noticed before. Only, there were no stairs to access it. Which, after Arsene wordlessly took him into his arms, left him with a new perspective, just above the gallery. He circles around the balcony, checking the walls once again for any sort of switch or panel. By the time he reaches the other side, Akira is ready to panic.

What would they do if there was no way out.

Despite Morgana being the one to set off the trap, he can't help but feel responsible for getting them in the situation; he'd been the one to agree to the investigation, after all. He'd been the one to lead their infiltration right up to the moment that he'd gotten them all trapped.

With a sign, Akira lowers himself to the ground, all but falling into a puddle of regret and panic.
At least there are no shadows around... He thinks miserably.

"Everything okay up there?" Panther's voice calls from below and it takes all Akira has not to ignore her voice.

Climbing to his feet, he's ready to admit that he doesn't have an answer, that he can't help them. He's about walk towards the balcony's railing when his body jerks backwards as he steps forward. The force is almost enough to send him back to the ground, but he merely staggers in place. Curious, Akira tilts his head over his shoulder and glances down in that direction of that force.

If only to make matters worse, the edge of his coat is caught in the grating of a vent. Then, as if his luck weren't bad enough, as soon as he tugs on it, the grate rips out of its place in the wall as if it hadn't been connected at all.

Akira's about to report back when Arsene's voice stops him yet again.

"A door does not dictate the path of a thief, much like a trail doth not impede a stag from harvest." His voice, as menacing and cynical as it is, manages to soothe some of the heat that been threatening to overwhelm him; though it did nothing to stop the layer of sweat that was building up under his clothes.

Instead of heading towards the balcony, he follows the advice of his persona, and slowly ducks into the vent.

The vent itself is quite large, more than enough space to for him to crawl on his hands and knees through. In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, the tunnel Akira finds himself worming through is quite dark, not that the dark has ever bothered him, but without a sense of direction, the swell of panic from before starts to return to its full force. Turn after turn, he finds himself wondering if Arsene had been onto something or not, or if he was merely trying to be helpful; either way, Akira can't fault him, he'd been doing nothing as a leader or as a phantom thief. Still, he continues forward, until he finally catches a glimpse of light at the far end of a long tunnel, then another just beyond that.

Crawling towards the first light, Akira peers down into it. His breath catches in his throat at the sight just below.

Shadows! He recognizes.

The two figures below him are silhouettes, despite being just under a light source and are standing around without doing much of anything.

"Hey." One says, causing him to jump.

"Yeah?" The other says, just as casually.

The two shadows continued on, carrying on a conversation as if they were human, sharing jokes and conversing like people; the display is realistic enough that it has him wondering if Morgana had been entirely truthful about shadows being just constructs of the palace's ruler. The guards carried on a conversation like two separate beings, nothing like how Akira's thoughts would interact with one another.

"Oh, did you get the new password?" The second shadow says suddenly, just as the other is about to walk off.

"New password?" The first one questions back.
"Mhm. It's Hello!"

"... What?"

"You know, like when you use a calculator, if you type 07734 and turn it upside down it looks like it's saying hello..."

"Er, alright then..." The second shadow responds, finally walking away. The first one marches in the opposite direction.

Akira watches through the vent for another moment, curious to see if the two shadows will come back, but after a moment, when they don't return, he crawls over the gate and advances towards the second grate in the tunnel. Once he reaches it, Akira finds himself staring at the inside of the security station from above. Just below him are a large number of screens, all of them are showing places in the museum and some just outside of it, depicting the long, long line of customers that they'd seen when coming on. On several of the screens, he's able to make out the forms of his teammates, still trapped in a grid of lasers and waiting on him.

Swallowing down the painful lump that had formed in his throat, Akira presses his face more firmly against the grate and glances around the room, trying to see if it had remained as empty as it had been the first time he'd peered into it. Fortunately, the room was as devoid of life as other parts of the museum had been and when he slams the flat side of his model gun against the grate, sending it straight downwards and crushing one of the monitors just below, nobody comes into the room.

Carefully, Akira levers himself out of the opening he'd just made and lands on top of a computer desk along side the crushed monitor and grate. Double-checking, he glances around the room once again, before climbing off of the desk and stepping onto the station's floor. Once again, he circles around the room, checking for panels or levers for the laser trap, but the only thing inside of the room he's in are computers and televisions. Approaching one of the first, Akira wakes up the computer is met with an interface that reflects the exterior of the museum, blindingly bright and golden.

Enter Password: The computer beckons and Akira carefully types in the password that the shadows had mentioned before, wondering if he was actually extremely lucky or if Arsene knew this might happen. Tilting his head, Akira can mostly make out the letters from the numbers and, just like the shadow had said, it spells out a greeting.

The screen flashes green once he inputs the code and is met with another interface. Several options appear on one side of the screen, on the other are several small camera feeds that exclusively display his trapped teammates in the room just beyond this one. Akira clicks through them and finally finds one that shuts everything off, including the traps.

Activating that sends the room into darkness, startling him. Glancing towards the windows, Akira sees that the gallery just beyond the glass is also devoid of light, both the lasers and the lights were deactivated.

"Nicely done." Arsene praises from within. His face, already sweaty and warm from the adrenaline and panic the situation had caused, heat up in the station's darkness.

With a massive sigh, Akira pushes open the security station's door and steps carefully into the darkened gallery.

"Akira- er, Joker?" Panther's voice calls out from the darkness.
Akira nods instinctively, then recalls that his teammates are in the same darkness that he's in. Tugging out his phone, he casts the area in front of him with a faint light. Panther's distinctive boot catches his attention and he walks forward, only to bump into a solid force that he recognizes as his other human teammate only after a small moment of panic.

Together, the three of them walk forward, towards the display in the center of the room, which still glows brightly, even without the light from his phone shining against it. Mona, who had been on top of the pillar holding up the vase, was now on top of the thing, attempting to reach down into it.

The area around them is suddenly cast in a warm orange glow. When Akira jerks his head to the side, he spots a bright orange flame in a brazier of two, oddly colored hands. He turns his attention back to Morgana.

"Good work, Joker." The cat says. The compliment doesn't strike him the way Arsene's had.

"Yeah, good job." Skull's voice calls out from just beside him. A hand, presumably, catches on his shoulder and the force is almost enough to make his knees buckle out from under him.

"Truthfully, I was starting to think we were goners when you didn't answer. I was totally panicking," Panther admits with a small laugh. Akira's just glad that he isn't the only one. "So... thanks for not giving up."

His face heats up again, even as the shame- or perhaps because of it- lances through his chest. He'd all but given up before the lucky accident with his coat.

"Anyways," Skulls calls out loudly and angrily, "What the fuck is wrong with you? We all coulda got killed and you're still attached to that stupid, fucking vase!"

The voice makes his pulse jump and the urge to panic hits again, hard, even when he's not the one being yelled at. All the same, Mona freezes from his place atop the vase and turns around to look at them for the first time. His expression, aside from the widened eyes, all but mirrors the ones that had been painted on Nakanohara's and Kitagawa's faces downstairs. It was rather painful to look at, especially on a cat, and especially when Akira himself was partly responsible for the situation.

Feeling brave, Akira steps front of Skull, effectively stopping him from continuing his tirade and quickly starts typing before the blond changes his mind.

"You shouldn't yell at Morgana, it was my fault too." He says, shining the message into his teammate's eyes.

"Your fault?" Skull questions, quietly, then much louder, "How the hell was that your fault? He's the one who ran ahead and got us all trapped! He should be the one apologizing!"

Morgana does so, in a quiet voice, "He's right, Joker, b-but I felt something from this thing. You can feel it too, can't you? This thing is a treasure!"

"A treasure?" Panther questions, "Like that crown in Kamoshida's castle?"

"Really?" Skull asks at the same time, his anger no longer absent. Akira thinks it's safe to breathe again and inhales shakily.

"Not the treasure," He clarifies, "It's just a treasure, a part of Madarame that he thinks is important."

"Important?" Panther echoes. Just as she says it, the vase sinks down as if melting under Mona's
weight. Forming a blob, it slips off of one side of the podium and falls to the ground. He's about to take a step closer to it when a flame erupts from its core and settles into the space above it. Slowly, the flame shifts into a diamond shape, then stills as if it had been frozen over instantly. Then, a voice calls out from the diamond, at the same time, the shape flickers and Akira sees two figures inside of the shape where nothing had existed before, almost like a television.

"It's beautiful, sensei." A woman's voice calls out suddenly. The image behind the screen zooms in on one figure, a woman. Her hair is dark and her eyes are downcast, staring at a massive jewel around her neck, attached by a silver chain.

"Of course." Madarame's familiar voice says in response. "It is merely a token of my appreciation. Though I might say, you are far more precious than any gemstone."

The woman's face erupts in shades of red. The images flashes and suddenly the woman is on the ground, her dark hair a mess around her. Her face is no longer red, but blue, though Akira can barely make it out with how the woman is violently shaking.

The diamond cracks, the flame sinks down into the amorphous, golden blob, disappearing from sight.

Stunned, Akira is barely able to react when the blob changes forms yet again, and leaps at him. Tripping over his own feet, Akira falls to the ground and stares upwards at a large spearhead where his head had just occupied.

"W-what the hell?" Skull blusters.

"Carmen!" Panther calls out over him. The ball of flame that had been lighting the area around them shifts and Akira hears it roar and ripple through the air as it's lobbed through the air. It connects soundly in the center of the reformed blob, but doesn't slow it down as its spear is retracted.

Akira scrambles to his feet, pulling Skull along with him once he does so, and gets the two of them out of the spear's range, just in time for it whistle in the space between them. Once they're far enough from the thing, Akira faces the beast and gets a good look at it. The blob had reformed into a knightly looking edifice, still colored in a sappy, molten gold that glistens brightly in the faint light from Panther's persona. Its body runs like a slow moving stream as another ball of fire is directed towards its center of mass. The plates of armor that cover its chest pull apart from each other and leave a wide open hole where the attack would have hit. Morgana, who had been positioned just behind the creature, leaps out of the way just before the attack would have hit him instead. The flame shoots past and lands on the floor and quickly smothers into a ball of smoke, casting the area around them into darkness once more.

"Where'd it go?" Skull shouts across the room, just before another ball of flame is consummated, embellishing the area in an orange glow and exposing the monster, who had moved back paces and was now focused solely on Morgana.

"Watch out!" Is shouted, just before the beast rears back its spear and sends it piercing through the floor that Mona had been standing on. The cat leaps out of the way once more, then again as the spear is pulled back and is shot out quickly. Another ball of fire is thrown, but the thing seems to absorb it this time, rather than evade it and the room is cast into darkness once again for a few seconds as Carmen creates another flame.

"Ann!" Skull shouts directly into his ear as the light is returns. Akira shoots a look to right just in time to see the blob slither up on Panther's side, outside of her field of vision. "Get down!"
The spear shoves bullets past the empty space where Panther had been standing and almost reaches him before he takes a step backwards.

Captain Kidd flickers to life and shoots out a bolt of blinding light, which splashes against the monster's chest, but doesn't seem to effect it at all. The attack after that one is enough of a distraction, however, for Takamaki to create some distance between her and the monster. She regroups just behind Skull and pulls her whip from her side.

"Keep the area lit up!" Skull orders.

Panther doesn't say anything, but Akira catches her persona flying above them and casting a wider ball of flame over the area. The monster glows even brighter, almost blindingly so, but Akira knows it's better than the alternative. Akira focuses as best as he can, letting his concentration steady him before he expels Arsene from inside of him. His persona shoots out a mass of blackened flame and causes the monster to scream in agony; the sound is ear-piercing and he's forced to cover his ears, but silently begs Arsene to continue his assault.

Regardless of whatever pain the monster is in, its speed doesn't seem to be impacted at all. It glides forward without moving the legs its created for itself and threatens to impale him with it's liquid, yet somehow solid, spear. This time, Akira barely has time to react and only manages to strafe slightly to his left before the weapon is barreling through the space between them and piercing the fabric of his coat. Whether it's the material of the weapon or the fear and adrenaline coursing through his bloodstream, Akira only feels a slight pressure as the spear digs into one side of stomach, just above his hipbone. He does, however, feel the pressure of the weapon being jerked out and rush of blood that follows after it.

Shivering, he retreats further, pressing his already crimson-colored hands to the wound and finally managing to draw his gun. The thing advances on him, not impeded in the slightest as he shoots shot after shot into it. The bullets, like Carmen's fire, seem to catch in it's skin and sink in without dealing any harm to it.

"Joker!" Morgana calls out, just as a haze of green washes over him. He feels the wound on his stomach start to close, stitching together with a force he doesn't understand.

Still retreating, Akira fires more rounds into the beast and does his best to command Arsene's attacks at the same time. It's a messy routine of stumbling backwards and aiming. All the while, bolts of lighting and powerful gusts of wind hammer down on the monster that seems solely focused on him, but nothing seems to slow it down. Hours seem to pass while he dashes around the gallery, dodging the monster's attacks, but for all the attacks he and his teammates are getting off, it doesn't seem to be doing any good. His chest heaves in exertion and with blood dripping down various parts of his body, he finds it hard to maintain a grip on his weapons. He knows, at any moment that his legs will crumble underneath him, the boost from the MetaVerse or his persona- he's still not sure which- is the only reason he's managed to stay upright for this long anyway. Never in his life had he had to keep going mobile this long and his thighs and knees are all but numb from the constant exertion.

Finally, it all stops all together.

Under the glow of Carmen's light, the golden knight stops in its tracks, its spear raised for another attack, but, like the rest of it, remains frozen. It emits a loud, ear-splitting crack. Then another, and then another after that. Akira watches, frazzled, as the golden form hardens and dulls. Large cracks fracture through it's skin, splitting it down the middle, then through the center of those pieces. Finally, the monster shatters into thousands upon thousands of shards of pale, golden rock.
Through the rubble, Akira can make out a faint gleam from within it. It, like the vase had, seems to draw his attention in a way he can't comprehend. Stashing his weapons inside of his bloodied coat, he lets himself explore his curiosity and approaches the pile of rubble. Sifting through the now crumbling form of the night, Akira wraps his fingers around something solid and extracts it from the remains.

The necklace in his hand is one that he recognizes, but it takes a moment for the rapid-firing in his brain to slow down enough for him to process it. The silver chain was the same one that had been in the vision the blob had displayed. The gemstone, however, was missing, leaving behind a blackened socket in the palm of his hand.

"That was..." Skull sighs, "Fuck."

Panther approaches him and Carmen floats down until she's floating just above the ground.

"Awful? Terrible?" She suggests with a smile that Akira can't find himself sharing when she turns it on him. Her gaze drifts downwards, to the now bloody chain hanging in his fingers. "That was in that... well, whatever it was."

"A memory." Mona informs. "It showed us something from Madarame's memory."

"Y-you mean that lady?" Panther gasps. Her face is stricken in shock.

**Madarame watched someone die.** The realization, for some reason, does not surprise him; though it probably should.

Pocketing the necklace, Akira lets out a sigh and with it, the integrity in his form seems to crumble like the memory they'd just faced. Falling to his knees, Akira feels himself starting to drift, though he knows he shouldn't; regardless, he's exhausted beyond anything he's ever felt, tired in a way that was bone deep and his legs refused to budge when he begs to stand.

"Akira!" Takamaki shouts, all too loud and all too close.

Opening his eyes, he's only half-surprised to find her leaning over him, her hair smacking him in the face and sticking due to the built up sweat and blood. He tries to apologize, but his fingers also refuse to follow his commands.

"What's wrong with him?" Skull questions, now also leaning over him.

"I think he's just exhausted." Panther answers in his place, her gloves press against his cheeks, then against his pulse.

"That shadow was on him most of the time." Mona admits, drawing close.

"And all I could do was play flashlight..."

"Ann."

Akira's eyes close and the heat from Carmen's flame warms them. They, too, refuse to budge in the short moments it takes him to fall completely unconscious.

The same warmth is the first sensation he feels when finally drawing back into consciousness, but when he opens his eyes, there's no Carmen, and no Panther or Skull. Instead, it's the setting sun piercing through the skyline and directly into his eyes that's giving him that warm feeling.
Turning away from the horizon, Akira comes face to face with Sakamoto. The blond is seated next to him, leaning against the wall and as unconscious as Akira had been until just moments ago. To his other side, he finds Takamaki in the same position, though her head is tilted at a sharp angle, so he's only able to see the golden crown of her head as it rests on his shoulder; his painfully numb shoulder. The weight in his lap is a combination of his school bag, Morgana, who is dirty and dusty, but slumbering peacefully, and the weight of the silver chain that was in his pocket.

He feels warm.

It's a logical conclusion, considering his proximity to three other living, breathing beings. His brain threatens to melt down on itself, yet a wave of calm washes over him with each question that arises.

Where were they.

Why were they all sleeping.

Why were they all so close.

Akira tries to make some distance between the four of them, but his body is still unresponsive and when he tries to take to his feet, his thigh only twitches in response and ignores the commands he's trying to enforce. Unfortunately, he's stuck in place until he's recovered more, though he has no idea how he's going to make it back to Yongen in the condition he's in. He considers, very, very briefly, sending a message to Sakura-san, but thinks better of it within moments. He was entirely at the mercy of his team until they woke up, until then, he was stuck with his thoughts.

He watched Morgana sleep for a while, still curious how they ended up in a pile against a wall, with Takamaki's head on his shoulder and Skull's ankle crossed over his. Morgana's presence was explained easily enough, they lived together after all, and, even when they argued- or more reasonably, Morgana was upset with him- the cat always found a way to be close to him while he slept and had, at some point, stopped finding it weird.

Still, Akira ponders, it doesn't explain these two being so close.

Nobody got close to him, even his parents kept their distance from the unusual existence of Akira- not that he could blame them- but, Sakamoto and Takamaki defied that.

They rebelled.

And maybe he was okay with that.

Chapter End Notes

This was probably a boring chapter for most of you, but leaving things to be implied isn't how I write.
Leave a review, if you should feel so inclined.
Also, I'm very unskilled with tagging, so if you guys think there any tags that are necessary please inform me of them, if you'd be so kind.
Both Sakamoto and Takamaki are dragging their feet, not to mention they look as tired as Akira feels, yet both of them end up walking him and Morgana all the way to his line. It's not something he makes sense of, especially considering the three of them shouldn't be seen together. All the same, no goodbyes are exchanged as Ryuji shambles towards the line in the opposite wing, one that leads to the other end of the city, and Takamaki disappears completely around a corner. He'd by lying if he didn't consider the whole ordeal strange, though it pales in comparison to what they'd all seen just hours before. Regardless of all that, he still glances around the station's platform a few times, trying to catch sight of the stalker. Part of him, whatever is left outside the pulsing ache he's feeling all over, is scared that when he glances over his shoulder he'll find the student council president standing there having seen the three of them grouped up once again, then Takamaki and Sakamoto would get in trouble for a mess Akira himself had caused. Not to mention what would happen to him once what they've been doing is dragged into the open.

Fortunately, when he does glance one way, then the other, he doesn't see anybody in the area paying him any attention.

There's no food waiting for him when he unlocks the cafe, nor is there any sign of his guardian for the next eleven months.

Part of him wonders if he should be worried about either of those things, yet when he finds it almost too difficult to wash his face in the cafe's sink or take off his glasses, he knows he wouldn't get very far looking for the other man, not unless he was hiding under the blankets in the attic; he wasn't.

Akira climbs into bed with Morgana just a step behind him, but when his head hits the pillow, he can't fall asleep, even when his eyes refuse to stay open. Something about being in the dark made everything much more intense. The cramping, burning pain from being stabbed remained, even if he was no longer bleeding. Morgana had healed him almost as quickly as it had happened and when they returned to the real world, his skin was smoothed over, sweaty, but not covered in blood like it had been. It still hurts though, the phantom pain that lingers, even when he's not seeing it behind his closed eyes.

Crawling out of bed, Akira doesn't bother to catch himself as he falls to the floor, though he does wince at the sound and pressure that tremors through his bones when he lands on the floor. Ignoring Morgana's calls, Akira reaches under the bed and grabs blindly at the creams and pills under the mattress. The white labels seem to glow where there is no light. Easy to spot as they are, Akira still reaches for his phone and uses it to illuminate the words on each of the bottles until he finds something to take the pain away. That relief comes in the form of a minty salve that feels like being set on fire while, somehow at the same time, being encased in ice. It's not entirely unpleasant to experience if he's being honest with himself, though he could do without how sticky his hands are when he climbs back into bed.

Sleep is practically immediate when the salve or cream- whichever it was- starts kicking in.

When he wakes up, Akira is refreshed, but stiff in his shoulders and legs. The pain from yesterday
feels like it's never left when he stands up but dulls when he applies another layer of the medicine from the night before. He throws the bottle in his bag just before Morgana climbs to it as a precaution and heads to the station without looking up.

By the time lunch rolls around, his stomach is cramping again and is only mildly soothed when he spreads the cream over his skin. With the pain in his abdomen, he doesn't bother getting anything to eat for himself, but he does- at the cat's request- scrape the red beans out of a roll and allows Morgana to eat what's left of it.

Sakamoto ends up texting the three of them just after lunch ends. Akira is walking down from the roof's stairwell when his blazer pocket vibrates but doesn't check it until he's safely in his desk and Morgana is mostly safe inside of that same desk.

"Can't do anything today gotta meet up with my ma"

Akira doesn't respond to the message, but he's quietly thankful that he won't have to go today.

It's not until long after that initial message that his phone vibrates again. He's in LeBlanc's attic, about to go back to sleep early in the afternoon when Sakamoto sends another message.

"You busy?"

He reads over the message a few times, deliberating. Considering if resting was him being busy or not. He doesn't reach an answer before he starts feeling nervous about taking too long to respond and ends up typing back a response.

"I don't think so." Akira offers guiltily.

"Can you come to the station right by the school? I need to talk to you." Something about the message filled him with dread. He had no idea what Sakamoto wanted or what the other was feeling. Had something happened with his mother and the blond wanted to take it out on him; Akira doubted that he would, he really did, but anything could happen; the MetaVerse was more than proof enough of that.

Akira, not really in the position to say no, sends back an affirmative and pulls himself away from bed. Morgana, already asleep, doesn't budge at all when Akira moves across the attic and collects his school bag. There's something odd about being able to easily sling his bag over his shoulder without the weight cutting off feeling in his shoulder; it was a feeling he wasn't used to, that much was true, but he hadn't realized just how much of Morgana's weight attributed to him feeling prepared to leave the house. The strange feeling of having forgotten something but leaving anyway was a hard one to quell. It reminded him a bit of being back home and forgetting his homework or something to write with.

Sakamoto was waiting just outside the line when Akira stepped off it. The blond, like him, was still in his school uniform and smiles when Akira approaches. His earlier thoughts, the ones that had made Ryuji out to be a bad person, ebbed after that, disarming his brain with no effort at all; he wondered if it should have made him more nervous.

"Hey." Ryuji greets, "Uh, thanks for comin' back out, I was worried for a bit that you mighta said no."

Akira shrugs, unsure what to say, that had almost been the case after all, as guilty as it made him feel.
Ryuji scratches at his cheek, then continues, "A-anyways, I wanted to talk to you about somethin'. I mean, something we already talked about, but I'm just-" He cuts himself off with a low, frustrated growl, then starts up again just as quickly as he stopped, "Just... come with me, will ya?"

The blond doesn't give him time to respond before he's being grabbed by his shoulder and led into a different part of the station. His heart is hammering too quickly for him to figure out exactly where he is and he's left to wonder if he should be doing something instead of letting himself be pushed to places he doesn't know.

In the end, Akira does nothing and Sakamoto pushes him onto a train he doesn't recognize and sits down next to him once it takes off. There isn't much time between one station and the next before Sakamoto is telling him to stand up again. A few dozen people get off with them, shoving him in every direction except backwards. It's more than a little disorienting, but he manages to keep sight of the only person he knows and follows the bright head of hair through the crowd until it's just the two of them standing outside of a line of shops.

Ryuji's mouth opens like he's going to say something, but Akira hears his teeth click together and figures that's the end of it. For now, at least. After a few minutes of waiting, the foot traffic seems to die a little. Akira takes that time to finally calm down, letting his heart stop slamming against his chest, though the time spent waiting doesn't do much to stop his mind from running just as quickly. It doesn't help that he still has no idea why Sakamoto brought him all the way out here or where here even was. The smell told him that the area, or at least the street that they were standing on at the very least, was crowded with restaurants; which helped him relax a bit, even though his stomach felt a bit queasy after an extended exposure.

Once the roads were mostly empty, Sakamoto's frame turns toward him and the blond finally speaks up

"Come on." Akira nods, if only to himself, and lets his teammate continue to guide him into the unknown. Sakamoto stops at the last place on the street. Akira stares up at the building and can't help but compare it to Madarame's house. The cement walls are littered with cracks that are sprouting green lumps that blossom outwards and downwards in wiry bundles; a type of plant that Akira doesn't know the name of. The noren, bright white flags with a logo he doesn't recognize hang down from what's left of the extended roof tiles, stop him from seeing inside the building, leaving Akira with the impression that he isn't going to like what he sees once he's past the entrance.

Sakamoto pulls back the entrance curtains and waves him inside. And, after taking a steadying breath, Akira walks himself into the building.

It's not that bad. Is the first thought that crops up in his head and is one that inspires guilt to swell up in his stomach. There isn't much time to consider an apology or something similar before Sakamoto grabs onto him once again, this time from behind, and pushes him through the restaurant's narrow walkway. The only empty seats that are next to each other are on the far side of the counter and Ryuji pushes him into the one closest to the wall before sitting on his left.

"Just a second, boys." A older man says from behind the counter, his hands deep in a cooker of some kind.

The same man appears in front of them with a smile. His face is tanned and shiny under the ceiling lights. His smile comes as easily as Sakamoto's even when they don't know each other and Akira finds that strange and uncomfortable.

"You kids know what you want?" To which Akira has no reply, he didn't even know what they
served here. When he shoots a look at Sakamoto and the blond doesn't look back, Akira feels himself starting to panic a little.

"Two tonkatsu bowls, old man!" Sakamoto answers for them. Or he hopes, at least.

"H-hey! Who're you callin' old?" The man behind the counter balks. His eyes go wide, exposing bright brown eyes. "Ryuji-chan?"

Akira glances towards his teammate just in time to see his face explode in a splash of color, though he looks away when the blond growls again.

"I didn't recognize you with all that hair! Has it always been so yellow?" The man goes on. Akira thinks he sounds happy, but isn't entirely sure. "I haven't seen you kids in here in ages! This a new recruit?"

Sakamoto goes quiet for a long time. "Nah. S'just... The team's gone, gramps."

"Oh." Is all the other man has to say to that at first, "Did- N-no, never mind, that's none of my business. I'll get that food started for you. It's good to see you around here, though."

Ryuji makes a noise that Akira can't identify, "Y-yeah, you too."

"Two Tonkatsu!" The older man yells loudly, just as he, the only behind the counter, heads towards the cooking appliances. He's not sure to make of that either.

Ryuji leans in closer and nudges his shoulder with his own. "Sorry 'bout that."

Akira shrugs, confused about a lot of things all at once, including why his teammate felt the need to apologize.

"I'll uh, start talkin' after we eat. Kobayakowa pulled me into his office durin' lunch and I didn't get a chance to get anything after school. 'Kay?" Akira nods, unsure what, if anything at all, he should say in response to that.

Kobayakowa... Ryuji had mentioned talking to him before about something, though the specifics were more than a little lost since it'd been so long ago since the blond had last brought it up.

A massive, over-sized bowl clatters onto the bar in front of him, which makes him jump. The elderly man behind the bar just smiles down at him and Akira averts his gaze back to the meal- the feast- in front of him. The situation reminded him a bit of his interactions with Sakura-san, especially after his visit with Takemi. But Akira has spent almost a month around him, skirting around him and doing his best not to get kicked out, and despite his efforts, Sakura-san rarely smiles.

"Two Ogikubo specials!" The man across from him says loudly while he slides over napkins and chopsticks.

Ryuji snorts, "You say that about every dish."

"Of course!" The guy booms in return, "Every dish I make is special, now eat!"

Ryuji snorts once more, then claps his hands together. Akira copies the movement.

The ramen is good, great even. It's certainly the best he's ever had, though that wasn't saying much considering his experience with the dish. There's a lot of chewing, which doesn't help how tired he
is, not to mention how it much it fills him up so quickly even though he only takes a few bites. Ryuji, who'd eaten just as little as had apparently, wolfs down the meal in a way that's almost disturbing to listen to. A torrent of splashing hits his ears, clapping over the background noise of the restaurant and the outside noise.

Somehow, his teammate finishes the dish. Akira watches, more than slightly bewildered if he's being honest.

"Did you already eat?" Ryuji asks once his bowl is empty. "Sorry, I shoulda asked before I dragged you all the way out here."

Akira shakes his head, but doesn't move to eat any more.

"So uh," Ryuji starts up quietly, "I guess I should talk to you what I wanted to... talk about."

He nods mutely.

"I dunno. It just. It pisses me off!" Ryuji explodes. His fist collides with the bar, making bowls and chopsticks- and Akira himself- jump in place. "So, Kobayakowa pulled me into his office, right. An' ya know how I told you that he wanted to give me back my scholarship so my ma doesn't sue Shujin? Well, after school, he called me back again and started spouting this bull about my future. How doing somethin' like that would ruin my chances of gettin' into college. You know what that potato-headed bastard said next?"

Akira shakes his head quickly, swallowing down the nervous convulsions in his throat. Somehow, the nervousness and anxiousness he'd been feeling had seeped into the atmosphere and everything felt cold against his skin.

"He wants to write me a letter of recommendation to whatever school I want." Ryuji's growl is something that Akira can feel in his spine, making it shudder in dread. "What a fucking idiot. I should tell my mom to go ahead and do it, just for sayin' that to me. She's totally gonna flip when I tell her that!"

It's turns quiet after that, save for Ryuji's forceful breathing.

"Sorry, dude." Sakamoto says eventually with a huge sigh. Akira watches his tense form sink back into the bar stool. "I didn't mean to get intense or anything, s'just... I dunno. After this year, there's only one year left of school for me. An' a scholarship to Shujin doesn't mean jack to me or mom after I graduate- If I graduate. An' we could use the money. But what if it's like those movies, ya know? Where they send a hitman or somethin' so we don't take their ass to court. My mom doesn't deserve that, I might, but she's been through enough."

Ryuji looks up from the bar he's been talking at and stares right at him. There's something in the other boy's expression he hasn't seen before and doesn't have a name for.

"What do you think I should do?" Sakamoto asks, still staring right at him.

Akira, who's entire life has been decided for him for the past sixteen years, doesn't have a clue how to answer his teammate's question, or where to start with looking for an answer.

"You don't deserve it." Is all he can offer. Nobody has ever come to him for advice, or whatever it was that Sakamoto was doing, and it was frustrating that he didn't have an answer for the other boy, if only to get himself out of the situation, as selfish as it would probably sound. Not knowing frustrated him and squeezed at his heart like he was in trouble. His fingers matched, too, squeezing across his scalp and tugging at his hair as he waited for Sakamoto to yell or do something to him.
for not being able to offer anything but condolences.

"Deserve what? The money?" Ryuji laughs, something low and slow, "You're probably right, I'd probably end up like the student council chick with a stick in my ass or those first years who just throw money around like it's nothin'."

"I didn't mean that. You said you would deserve it if they sent a hitman after you. You don't deserve that." Akira corrects, feeling even worse that he's said the wrong thing in the wrong way.

"Oh." Is Ryuji's only reply for a long moment, followed by a snort, then, "I ain't all sunshines and puppies, Akira, I mean, neither is my mom, but she deals with my shit an'... Point is, she deserves better."

"So do you." They all did. Sakamoto, Takamaki, Mishima, and Suzui.

"Whatever." Ryuji murmurs back, "Uh, thanks, I guess, but- whatever. Anyways! Tell me about you. I know you gotta record thanks to Kamoshida's big mouth an' all, but we've been hangin' out for like, ever, an' I feel like I barely know you at all."

Akira felt like running. He was his own worst subject, not to mention how terribly he seemed to be doing at saying simple things.

"What do you want to know?" He asks. There's never been someone who's been curious about him, about his actions, definitely, but never about him; unless that was what Sakamoto was getting at.

"I dunno, dude, you know my whole sob story, my problems, and the color of freakin' socks, I just wanna know you. That's what friends do, yeah?" Ryuji goads, like it's all obvious to everyone but him.

What friends do. He had no idea what friends did, or that Sakamoto even considered him as one. Should he have known that?

Akira shakes his phone in front his teammate again, repeating the message. Ryuji rolls his eyes at him.

"I dunno, you gotta favorite color?" The blond asks simply.

Akira did not. He shakes his head.

"Any sports?"

Again, he shakes his head.

"Video games, then?"

When he shakes his head a third time, Ryuji sighs deeply, something that makes him feel like trash.

"You grow up under a rock or somethin'? Give me somethin' here!" Akira thought he sounded pretty angry at this point.

Akira's not sure what to say, he's not an interesting person, or he wasn't at least, before he came to Tokyo. Even after he came, he's still the same person, only now he has the power of persona. "Kay then, you're probably gonna hate me for askin', but- I know that you're not what Kamoshida said..."
about you. Still, I've been wondering 'bout what happened before... all this, when you uh... got arrested."

Akira's almost relieved when Sakamoto breeches the subject. It had been all everyone had ever talked about since he moved, just never with him. Not even Sakura-san had asked about what he had done.

"I'll tell you." And he does. It takes a while for him to type it all out. He can't help but feel that it's weird that his first time telling someone was in a ramen place to a phantom thief. He'd be lying if he didn't think about it though, what he would have said if the judge, or anybody there that day, would have asked him his side of the story. Still, thinking about what he might have said and actually putting it into words for someone to see, for someone to judge him and tell him that it actually was his fault, that everything he told himself in that moment and every night afterwards had all been a lie.

Hearing something like that from Sakamoto, who was like him in many ways, would make him... Akira didn't know what he would feel, actually.

Ryuji reads over the message and Akira forces himself not to watch the blond as he does, keeping gaze level with the bar in front of him. That feeling, doubt and sadness and anger ride through him, so he doesn't look up, not until Ryuji says something or never speaks to him again.

The sound of Sakamoto's fist hitting the bar startles him, even in the split second that he's able to see it coming. His arms, where they're folded on the bar and close to the impact, vibrate slightly.

"That's bullshit!" Ryuji says, just as the man behind the counter appears in front of him.

"Ryuji-chan, you're disturbing the other, paying customers, can you kids take this outside?"

"I am a payin' customer!" Ryuji levels back.

The guy scoops their bowls away with a smile, "Your money's no good here, Sprintmaster, go play outside."

Ryuji bristles. Akira can see his jaw clench in what must be a painful way, but the blond says nothing and, instead, claps him on the shoulder and leads him out of the building.

"That's bullshit!" He shouts as soon as they're past the noren, a large number of eyes turn towards them but Ryuji doesn't seem to notice at all."You totally saved her and she testified against you?"

Akira bobs his head and wonders if he should have said anything at all.

"Just hearin' that pisses me off! How can you be so calm about it, that bastard almost ruined your life and he didn't even show up at the trial!"

Akira shrugs and doesn't bother trying to correct his teammate about how wrong he is. Since coming to Tokyo, he's pretty sure he can count the number of times he's been calm and not on the verge of having a break down. He just can't show it, not in front of people who depend on him or vice versa; he has no idea how Morgana would react if the leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts were to start crying or have a nightmare about being at home.

"Still..." Ryuji continues, guiding him towards the station, "Hearin' that made me realize how similar we are, gettin' treated like crap. Ann too, but in a different way. What I mean is, I'm glad I met you."
Akira isn't expecting anything like that, but Ryuji's words make him feel warm inside, which spreads to his face quickly enough. He's unsure how to reciprocate or how he really feels about everything. He's definitely grateful to Sakamoto for saving his life and for protecting him, both in the MetaVerse and in real life, but another part of him is still stuck on the fear he feels when he's around other people, Sakamoto included; like he's been absent all this time and he doesn't understand what he's missing. Still, being around Sakamoto makes him feel content, knowing that they're changing people; he doesn't look at him with disgust or pity, as far as he can tell anyways. He even called the two of them similar, not to mention that the blond thinks of him as a friend, something he hadn't seen courtesy.

"Has anyone ever told you that you spend too much time inside your own head?" Arsene rumbles from within, making him shudder at his suddenness. He offers an apology but doesn't receive a reply or any sort of acknowledgement from the other.

Sakamoto sits next to him when the train arrives, despite the numerous open spots, but doesn't say much. Akira has no idea what to make of it and decides to follow the other's lead, letting the rattling of the tracks and the hum of machinery be the only noise between them before they end up at the station that the blond had told him to meet at.

"Hey uh," Sakamoto starts. His hands are behind his head, a pose that reminds Akira a little too much of when he'd first been arrested. Swallowing down a swelling panic, he tries to listen to what his teammate says instead of the sirens that he knows shouldn't exist. "I wanted to thank you, for listenin' to me bitch all night, I know you probably had better stuff to do than hear anything that came outta my mouth, but uh, thanks, dude. Forreal. See ya!"

Sakamoto puts his hands down, shoving one into his pocket and throwing the other one into the air to wave as he retreats. Akira is pretty sure his arms have long since turned into rocks at his side, hanging limp; heavy and useless in ways they shouldn't be.

He doesn't manage to sleep well that night. First, he has trouble actually getting to sleep, something that not even a bath seems to help. Then he's plagued by memories he'd been starting to forget. He's more than grateful when Takamaki messages all of them telling them that she wouldn't be available for palace infiltration that day, which would mean that he'd be free to attempt another bout of rest as soon as school finished if it weren't for his phone vibrating not long after Takamaki's initial message. Akira had been expecting a reply from Sakamoto, or perhaps an explanation from Takamaki, instead it was someone else entirely.

The clerk from Untouchable, Iwai.

"Stop by the shop today. I got a new shipment, something you'll like."

It was another situation in which Akira couldn't decline. He needed Iwai, even in a way where when the older man requested him when he felt like he did, he had an obligation to show up; if he wanted Iwai's strength, that is, not to mention the weapons he provides. Which are the reasons why he's standing outside of the shop, nearly swaying on his feet and feeling weaker than he had in quite some time. Morgana thought it was a good idea, considering the effectiveness of their gear during their most recent shadow run in. His explanation keeps him from being completely hesitant to sending a confirmation to the clerk in return.

The door, much like LeBlanc's, announces his otherwise disregardable, and otherwise unimportant, presence and Iwai looks up at him from behind a laptop that's perched on the shop's counter that's concealing everything from his nose down from where Akira is standing.

Iwai stands as soon as the door clicks in place behind him and speaks to him quietly, "Let's head
Akira watches him go, stepping around his chair and disappearing into the room just behind him. The instructions stun him for a moment, then he finds himself weaving around display cases and towers of boxed model guns until he's able to navigate behind the counter and into the door that the other had disappeared into.

The door, like the one that separates the shop from the alleyways outside, clicks shut as soon as he steps through it and the sound makes him jump in place before Iwai is suddenly standing in front of him, tall and towering; imposing in a way that has him swallowing down nervous energy. Akira has to resist the urge to lift his hands as well and ask what was happening. The room they stepped into was poorly lit, and littered with boxes and merchandise, but nothing that looked particularly like a new shipment. Not that he would know what that looked like.

"I gotta favor to ask of ya." The man drawls, quiet and intense while Akira stares at the man's boots. He can feel the other man's gaze like a spotlight shining down on him, equally as heavy and intense as his words.

He doesn't remember agreeing to any favors in their last meetings, and he's not sure what use he'd be to someone like the clerk anyway.

"Think of it as an extension on our contract." The man says as if he can read Akira's thoughts, though it's probably more likely that the man can see his confusion with his attentive and unwavering gaze, one that Akira can't even begin to match. "You do me favors when I call you, I give you some more than fair deals. Seems pretty fair to me, right?"

Akira finds himself bobbing his head without thinking and wonders if he's going to end up regretting this.

"Alright," Iwai says, lifting an arm. With the lack of distance between them, Akira's body tells him that it's about to collide with him and he recoils without a second thought. When nothing comes, when there's no pain or punishment, Akira waits another moment before he allows himself to open his eyes. Iwai is still standing in front of him, still too close in a dimly lit storage room of sorts, with his hand on his chin. His fingers, which are stained black with- most likely- oil of sorts and also something Akira only just notices, stroke over his bearded chin. The action reminds him of his caretaker. Iwai's eyes are no longer trained on him, a fortune that Akira only soaks up for seconds before it's taken away again and his gaze, as if on auto-pilot, flickers back down to the man's boots. A primal sort of shame floods through his system like an earthquake that half mutes the next thing that the man says to him.

The clerk claps a hand on his shoulder, which may have as well been a bolt of thunder for how much it startles him. The man's grip is as firm as his voice, and just as attention-grabbing as the look Akira finds himself under. The combination of factors leaves him a little overwhelmed, like everything has suddenly increased in volume all of a sudden. Iwai is all but yelling when he's leaning further down and whispering into his face.

"You're gonna walk outta here, outta the store, and into the street. Then, I'm gonna text you an address. I expect you there in no less than ten minutes, glasses, you're gonna sit down at a booth in the back and order somethin' to eat. A hamburger, tempura, a bowl of natto and mayonnaise, whatever you kids eat these days. I'm gonna show up with a... friend, okay? You don't look at me and you don't know me, but you are gonna listen to me. When I start coughin' real loud," The clerk gives him an example of just this, bending halfway over himself as he falls into a powerful coughing fit. He stops just as quickly as he starts and overwhelming him with instructions in low tones, "Then, you're gonna take your phone, and you're gonna call me phone, then I'm gonna leave.
in a hurry; that's all ya gotta do, glasses, think you can do that for me?"

Akira didn't know if he could do that, any of that, but he finds himself bobbing his head, nodding, without a second thought.

"I'm trusting you." Iwai says, hands low enough that Akira can see them when he does. It's not so much as the things that the clerk tells him so much as the way he tells him that leaves him feeling calmer and a little more comfortable with whatever they were doing.

"Now scram, I'll text you the place." The other orders him out loud.

Akira obliges, checking off one step on his list of instructions once he's leaving the musty storage room, then another once he's stepping out of Untouchable. It takes a long moment for his phone to light up with Iwai's message that instructs him on where to head next.

Ten minutes. He reminds himself, copying the address into the real world navigator and following its instructions.

The diner the address ends up being is on the second floor of a take-out place. The smell is almost enough to deter him; starchy foods that steam up and slam into him like a force of nature make his non-existent stab wound. Morgana squirms against his ribs and butts his head through the gap in the zipper, his nose peaks into the sky then pivots towards the stand to one side of him.

"That smells good, Joker. Are we going there?" His teammate asks. Akira can feel purring, the other vibrating against him through the thin material of his school bag.

Akira answers by walking up the stairs of the building, away from the smells that were starting to burn holes in his stomach. It's one of the first times he's walked into a restaurant with the intentions of ordering food- even if that wasn't the only thing he was doing- and most certainly the first time he's been in this situation without someone else guiding the interaction between him and the server; he would remember the gross feeling on the palms of his hands as he types out what he wants after seating himself and how his phone almost slips out of his hand twice while the waiter reads the tiny print on it.

He follows first Iwai's advice and orders a hamburger, though he doesn't have any intentions of eating any of it, regardless of the number of adjectives in its description. His talk with Sakamoto and the nightmares that followed, had flipped a switch inside of him, where he didn't feel all that hungry and the thoughts, smells, and textures of food only made him more adverse to eating again. Then the thought that he can eat only piles on top of that, he could have anything he wanted, can go out and buy anything that he might want to eat.

Maybe that's what makes it worse. Akira ponders morosely while he checks the time. There were too many options, too many chances for him to get back into trouble- with the law or otherwise- and end up doing something he ends up regretting. His thoughts did not fill him with confidence about what was about to happen.

Akira is mindful to follow the clerk's other instruction and doesn't look up when anyone enters his field of vision, though he can't say he isn't tempted. If only to see the older man was actually coming and not just

"Enjoy your food." The waiter says suddenly, startling him. Akira jumps in place as it happens, then again when his food clatters onto the tabletop in front of him. The man is gone before Akira can offer his thanks.
A sharp, barking laugh interrupts his not looking and draws his attention, even Arsene, who usually feels like a blanket of consciousness resting over his own shifts at the sound, sending a sharp spark down his spine. Akira's head jerks just in time to spot Iwai with the friend that he'd mentioned, or that's what Akira figures is the case. The man is dressed blindingly bright in a white suit that is just as attention-grabbing as the sound coming out of his mouth.

Don't look. Akira reminds himself, forcing himself to look down at his plate, then down at Morgana, who had, at some point, started crawling out of the bag again and is staring at the meal on the table with wide eyes.

Even with his head down, he's able to track the pair's presence as they take the booth directly behind him. With the minimal distance between them, Akira is able to pick up every word that Iwai and his friend say.

"A diner, huh?" Iwai's friend starts up, his voice is lower than Akira thought it would just from hearing his laugh. "I thought only old farts came to place like this. I gotta say, you've really changed, Mune-san!"

"Hey," Iwai retorts. He sounds softer than Akira has ever heard him, it sounds like how Takamaki or Sakamoto talk him when changing hearts isn't the topic. "Don't knock this place, Masa-san, it ain't half bad; and cheap too!"

Masa-san laughs again, high-pitched and loud enough that Morgana's ears fold downwards on themselves when Akira feeds him another portion of the hamburger between them. "That's rich comin' from you! Same guy who beat up fifty of the Oyabun's private guards! I can't even start believin' you're the same guy from back then!"

"No need to exaggerate." Iwai says a little more quietly.

"Yeah, yeah, you always were too ah, what's the word? Modest? Always too modest, is what you was, Mune." Masa-san replies, "Anyways, what did you bring me out here for anyway? Nobody's givin' you trouble, is they?"

"Nothin' like that." Iwai responds back. It leaves Akira a little more comfortable when the other man says that. "But uh, how's Tsuda-san doin'?"

"Same as always." Masa-san says quickly, "Why, what's up?"

Iwai's voice drops even lower, "Nothing, honest, I just saw him 'round the other day and I was just thinkin' about everyone."

"Didn't you two cut ties when you left the family, though?" Masa-san snaps back, "Whaddya worried about him for?"

"I was just thinkin', maybe it's time to bury the hatchet between the two of us. An' it's not like I can go up n' talk to the guy, y'know?"

"Oh." Masa-san drags out loudly, "I getcha! Still holdin' up that ol' code of honor, huh?"

Iwai snorts from a table over. "Somethin' like that, Masa."

"I got it, I got it." Masa-san continues, "I'll call 'im right now, set you up with a meetin'!"

"Nothin' like that, Masa, it's gotta look natural- like a coincidence- me an' him, at the same place at the same time."
"Yeah, I getcha, I getcha, I'm listenin'!" Masa-san says back brightly, "Well, if that's the case then, don't tell him I said anything, okay? Shibaura might work out, we've been talkin' about redeveloping up there."

Iwai starts to cough. Loud, wet hacks that make him worry a bit for the man's health, acting or not. Akira pulls up Iwai's contact and lowers himself in the booth before putting the call in.

"You finally dyin' or somethin'?" Akira hears Masa-san say through one ear, just as his phone- and Iwai's- start ringing in the other.

"Hello?" Iwai says formally into both of his ears. "Wait what?! Your order's all wrong? Listen, I'll come over right now and check it out for you."

"I gotta go. Work shit. We can talk another time, yeah?" Iwai says to Masa-san before walking towards the door without having received an answer. In his ear, Akira hears, "Don't hang up the phone, glasses, try to get it as close to him as possible without makin' him suspicious, got that?"

Akira leans back in his seat. Even while he feels panic starting to flood his system, starting to slow everything down so he has a chance to make sense of what's going on, his hand tilts back on his own, letting Masa-san's voice flow through his phone's microphone.

"Tsuda-san" Masa-san starts, speaking low, nothing like he'd sounded when Iwai had been in the room. "It's Masa. Mune was just askin' about you. Yeah- I did exactly what you told me. 'Course, I did! I just said I did! Anyways, he probably heard about that special deal of yours and now he's tryna squeeze some money out of you; get paid some debt he thinks he's owed or somethin'. Ye-yeah, I understand. I'll be- I'll be right there."

Masa leaves in a flash of white, storming down the diner stairs while still talking on his phone.

"A deal, huh..." Iwai mutters into his ear, "Sounds like somethin' fishy is goin' down. Hmm. Oh, and, Glasses, my little fly on the wall. I wasn't expectin' much when you first showed your mug in my shop, but I gotta say, I'm impressed; you kept your cool, followed my instructions. Hell, I dunno what kinda luck I stumbled on, but I'm counting on you, glasses. Listen, it's kinda late, why don't you just finish eating an' head home, I'll thank you in person and show you my new stock some other time; might even throw in somethin' extra for doin' this for me."

Akira was at a loss for words. If he had the means to talk back into the phone, to say something to the other man, he had no idea what would come out of his mouth. Nobody had ever complimented him like that, and never so many times in a row; he'd been useless, he'd been a waste of space, he was barely a human being sometimes, but if Iwai was to be believed- and Akira wanted to believe him so very badly- he was more than that, more than a phantom thief, too. He mattered to someone. The word friend sprang back into his mind like something he'd forgotten and wondered if that word would apply to this, his relationship to Iwai, or if he was just misjudging everything like he tended to do.

He didn't have an answer on the train, or when he reached LeBlanc. And when tears start rolling down his cheeks while he keeps as still as possible in fear of waking his roommate, Akira doesn't mind not having an answer. Unlike the previous night, he doesn't have any trouble falling asleep or staying asleep and he wakes up the next morning feel rather refreshed, the residual exhaustion from the night before seems to have folded in on itself until it was impossible for him to find.

Despite the, albeit tenuous, happiness that he's feeling, Akira doesn't want to get up, rested as he is. He doesn't want to put on his school uniform and return to Shujin, where he's meant to conceal himself, where he's made out to be one of the monsters that he wants to stop. But he does it
anyway, he gathers his school clothes and changes in the bathroom of the cafe he lives in and hides faded scars and medicates for ones that should be there but aren't.

School isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to him, nor is being bullied, yet for some reason he feels this *something* under his skin at the thought of going. This pressure in his veins and chest that wants him to crawl back into bed and test if Sakura-san would actually have him arrested.

The rain makes his stomach hurt, too. The droplets wash away his mood as well, dragging it down into sewer system with blades of grass and wilting cheery blossoms, but he continues walking until he's back at the place he doesn't want to be.

For once, nobody is staring at him when Akira walks into the school. It reminds him, briefly, of the day the calling card had been dropped; except it wasn't raining and that vibrant red wasn't visible. Akira wonders what's happened, or happening, or maybe going to happen for something this unusual to occur.

He manages to hear fragments of conversations as he weaves himself through the outskirts of the crowd, navigating past wet umbrellas and slippery tiles until he's able to piece it all together.

Grades for their mid-terms had been posted. On the far wall from the entrance, where anyone walking in could see, were the grades of every student at Shujin Academy. It made him a little uncomfortable, if he was honest. He was already labeled as a killer, an outcast, and all other sorts of derogatory names because of his record; he didn't also need to be reminded that he wasn't the smartest person in the room.

Before he could look at his- presumably- meager results, a wave of faculty members began herding the students towards the classrooms. Akira let himself be pushed along as well until he was in his seat behind Takamaki.

The blonde didn't look at him as he entered the classroom, nor when he took his seat, but she did text him as soon as the lecture from Chouno starting lecturing.

"I can't make it today either. Sorry guys! But today is the last day of the shoot and I'm free after that!"

Akira didn't respond to the message, but Sakamoto did.

"Same. Come Saturday we're gonna kick some ass!"

He doesn't respond to that one either, unsure what to say to either message besides indicating that he'd received and read the messages that they'd sent, which the program they were using already did for him.

It wasn't until lunch that he was able to head back downstairs. And, as much as he wanted to convince himself that it was for lunch- either for him or Morgana- Akira still couldn't find his appetite and instead, after a deep breath, and steps towards the board where the grades were posted.

Starting from the bottom, he scanned upwards, until he more than certain that he'd been excluded from the list altogether.

Akira stops towards the top, right as his finger runs over the kanji for his family name.

#6 Kurusu Akira

He wondered if he should be proud instead of shocked, or perhaps walking the list into the faculty
office and question if he'd been put in the wrong spot. Instead of that, and instead of feeling proud, Akira wonders what his parents would think, if they'd be proud of him for something like this. Part of him already had the answer, but the other half ignored it as resolutely as he could.

*If they ever write, I'll tell them.* Akira promises, then immediately feels stupid right after. He returns to the classroom without getting lunch and reminds himself that he'll have to feed Morgana extra when they get home.

Akira does exactly that, opening canned food for his teammate while he gets ready for bed. For the first time in two days, when he planned on going to LeBlanc to rest, his phone didn't light up once, and not even Sakura-san said anything to him before he ascended into the attic and climbed under the covers with his school uniform still on.

Somehow, he manages to sleep through the rest of the afternoon and the entire night. He hadn't planned on it going that way, he had only planned on taking a nap and then to study for the next set of exams or take a bath, something other than what was available for before he'd moved to Tokyo.

When he went to school that day, there were no cancellations and no text messages from Iwai or calls Sakura-san. With that in mind, Akira found himself walking in one side of the station and out the other, headed past Shibuya square and into the residential district. It didn't take him long to notice that he was the last one of their team to arrive, which filled him with guilt that didn't manage to escape him as he bowed towards the other two.

"Akira-kun, you made it!" Takamaki greets with a smile. "Ryuji was starting to think you fell asleep at the station again."

"I did not!" Sakamoto protests, huffing, "I was just wonderin' what was takin' so long."

"Yeah yeah, me too. I was worried something else might have happened at school. I heard you knocked Hayawaka-san out of tenth place." Takamaki admits, "I heard she stormed out of her last period and demanded Kobayakowa expel you."

Akira flinches.

"Oh yeah, mid-terms came out today... I'm so screwed." Sakamoto mutters.

"Ryuji..." Takamaki says softly.

Without warning, Sakamoto activates the MetaNav, giving him into a small fit of nausea that disappears as soon as his body cloaks itself in a burst of bright blue flames. His clothes shifts forms and the mask blinked into existence in front of his eyes without warning. It startles him for a moment, but it doesn't make him jump like it probably should. The silent streets of the residential district fill up with shouting figures and everything that had been soaking in sunlight is now coated in darkness.

Underneath his skull-shaped mask, Akira catches his teammate smiling back. "I'm just glad those stupid tests are over. Prob'ly rigged anyway."

"They are *not* rigged, Ryuji." Panther shoots back, stepping forward until Akira can't see either of their faces. "You're just an idiot." She laughs.

Skull doesn't, "H-hey! You got no room to talk, I bet your name is just as low as mine, Miss 'I'm Only Good At English!'"

Panther's arm swings back and Akira catches sparks upon sparks of orange flame starting to drip
from her arm and shoulder. They flutter to the ground swiftly, not unlike raindrops, and turn into ash. "Better to be good at one thing than sucking at everything." She whispers harshly and so lowly that each consonant seems to click out of her mouth and is accompanied by the hushed roar of flames spitting towards the ground.

"Whatever." Skull shoots back quickly, ending the conversation but not the circle of ash starting to form around their teammate, before turning towards the massive wall in front of them.

Akira finds the situation uncomfortable, even more so when Morgana advises that he take the lead and he gets three sets of eyes following his every move as they move to reinfiltrate the museum. Together, the four of them return to the roof using the ropes that were still in place from the last time they'd been inside and slide through the glass dome on the roof, sliding down into the empty museum below. It's easier for him to orient himself on the rope, having done it before, but he can't shake the feeling that he's going to fall and have them all discovered.

"Woah." Akira hears Skull whisper as he slides down. When he lands on the ground, Akira looks up at his teammate and finds the blond staring towards the door.

The door is split into three pieces of blank space, all divided by familiar crimson beams shooting through the door frame horizontally. It's a set-up that hadn't been there the last time they'd infiltrated. In addition to that, when Akira strains his ears, he hears something else has changed within the museum, the painfully loud roar from outside that disappeared as soon as they were inside had somehow shifted into the building and quiet praises of Madarame's works shot into his ears from a distance away, close enough that he could make out their voices, but somehow far away enough that he couldn't actually see the source.

"There's a big enough gap that we can just duck under it." Panther points out from the doorway.

"Isn't it suspicious that this door is protected like that display from before?" Mona asks suddenly.

"You mean the trap that you set off?" Skull questions in return.

"It- T-that was a complete accident!" Morgana splutters out in a whisper.

"Not if you just followed your own advice and not touch anything!"

"So you think Madarame knows we're in here then?" Skull continues, looking first at Morgana, then at him.

"It's more likely that setting the system off made him more suspicious in general, so we need to be more-"

"Shh!" Panther suddenly hisses back at them, cutting off what Morgana was saying. "I think there's a shadow!"

Akira feels his heart sink at that, pulsing heavily against his chest, then his stomach, all the way down to his feet. Over that pulsing, he hears the slow clicking of feet against tile in just the room over with the only thing separating it from them is the twin red wires in the doorway.

"Clear in room one-dash-six." A man's voice calls from the other room, just as a splotch of yellow light swims across the doorway. Akira's breath catches in his throat and waves them away from the door just before a beam of light pierces across the room and walls. He moves as quietly as possible, kneeling against the side of the doorway with Morgana right under his chin. The next seconds, as the light swims across the far walls and floor of the empty gallery, are the longest of his life; his heart pounds away in his chest, nearly in sync with the rapidness of his lungs.
"Room one-dash-seven; clear" The man- the shadow- reports before the room is dark again.

Akira waits, though, pressed against the wall and panting for a few more moments, listening to the retreating footsteps of Madarame's guard. Once he can no longer hear them, he finally allows himself to push off the museum's wall. Next to him, Skull, Panther, and Mona form a circle around him.

"That was close." Skull sighs out, now whispering. Akira finds himself unable to respond, even when he agrees.

"Agreed." Mona concedes, "We need to be on guard at all times and avoid setting off any more alarms."

"Isn't that going to make finding the treasure take forever, though?" Panther questions. Her arms are folded, but, fortunately, not on fire.

"Most likely, but... It's important that keep Madarame and the shadows from discovering what we're up to or things will become even more complicated." Mona advises after peering his head through the gap in the lasers.

"I guess... It's not like standing around in this outfit will help Kitagawa-kun. Let's go!"

Akira is sent through the trap first, since he's the leader of all them, thus he's the first one to discover the next shadow they cross paths with. He does his best to coordinate the four of them around one of the partitions in the room, waving them behind him as he ducks behind it himself.

Except there's a blowing whistle and suddenly a light is cast upon the four of them.

"S-shit!" Skull hisses out beside him, just before he jumps forward and attacks the shadow's arm. The whistle drops to the ground and disappears in a flash of smoke, along with part of the guard's uniform. It shifts into another being entirely, with orange skin and radiant wings that flutter loudly as it sends waves of fire towards them and leaving scorch marks on the walls and paintings behind them. It does seem to notice though, as the same is dealt back from its side, an equally large burst of red flame crashing into its side and grounding it.

"P-please spare me." It cries in a deep, masculine voice.

Akira does, letting the beast's body and essence disappear as it floats into him. It purrs from inside of him, vibrating against his brain and grating against Arsene's presence.

Akira is able to navigate them through the first floor without much difficulty, though when he pushes through the low-cognition room by the stairs leading to the second floor, he feels himself all but melting into sofa on the far end of room. The others, he notices, don't seem quite as drained as he is, but their faces shine in sweat and seem as if they needed the break just as much as he did.

Unsure how much time passes in the MetaVerse, Akira remains prone until he feels like he can continue; still tired and with a heaviness in his bones, he takes to his feet and watches the others do the same. With that same coordination, they follow him out of the room and towards the stairs, sneaking behind him as quietly as if they were his own shadow. He finds the whole process unnerving; the silence, the trust in him to lead them correctly, the way Morgana smiles at him each time they pause around corners.

The four of them pass the display they'd reached yesterday, though the only thing left under the multiple spotlights was the podium that the vase had been perched on. Even still, he arcs around it, fearful for what might happen if he's too careless. The room beyond that is another corridor that
houses a variety of display cases, but no shadows.

"Joker, wait!" Mona says almost too loudly. Either way, Akira stops in his tracks and finds Morgana standing on top of one of the cases. A flood of panic threatens to wash over him at the sight.

"I feel something in this case." His teammate explains while unsheathing his sword and shoving in between sections of the glass casing.

"You mean you feel another trap?" Skull grunts out.

"It's not like that, it's not alive at all." Mona responds just as the front of display jerks open.

Akira, despite himself, leans forward. The others do too. Inside the case is a thick, red cushion that shines despite the lack of light around it, in the middle is a divot that curls downward to house a smooth looking stone. The stone itself is quite small, with multiple flat faces that make it gleam ever more so.

"It's a rock." Skull points out, rubbing a yellow finger over one of the stone's flat faces. Panther's elbow jerks sideways, eliciting a sharp yelp from the blond on her other side.

"It's a gemstone." She corrects, pushing Skull's glove out of the way with both her own. The pink appendages draw forward, enveloping the stone around both sides. Slowly, she pulls her hands away from the case and lifts the stone up for Mona to observe. Akira watches his teammate as he prods the stone, stroking claws around the angles of the faces with a sharp, feline smile on his own.

"What is it, Mona?" Panther questions, "It must be valuable, right?"

Mona simply nods, staying quiet for a few more seconds, "It's real. It has Madarame's scent all over it, so it's likely something that he has in his house."

"But you saw that dump! An' he was talking about how owning nothing matters. Why would he have a fancy rock sitting around that dump then?" Skull bites back.

Panther shakes her head, "I don't think that's it, Ryuji. I think this means that Madarame has another house... Right, Morgana? That's what this means?"

Morgana's smile, if anything, grows wider before he's bobbing his head. "Very astute, Panther." The cat praises, finally taking the gem stone into his paws, only to throw it right at him.

Akira jumps back half a step as the gemstone is lobbed towards him, it thumps against his chest before his hands can react and his blood-red hands fumble with it before he's finally able to clasp his fingers solidly around it. Morgana continues to smile at him. Akira takes a moment to observe the light purple stone for himself, bringing one hand up so he can look at it in the museum's dim lighting while the other rubs at the painful spot on his chest. Then he pockets it and turns his attention back to his teammates.

Without words, the four of them continue down the hall of Madarame's palace. Akira made sure to remain quiet, softening the click of the heels on his boots as much as he could and keeping his ears open for any unusual noises. The hallways's end opened up to a balcony that looked over another gallery; a dead-end of sorts, as there was nowhere left to go and no more corridors or stairs to climb up.

Akira slides onto the railing and follows Mona as his teammate leaps onto the floor below. The impact shudders up his legs and into his knees painfully, but his drop didn't seem to trigger any
alarms of guards. That is, until he stood up. Taking to his feet, Akira feels a loud, shrill blaring echo through the room they'd just dropped into. The blackness of the ceiling shifts with a dangerous looking red glow. To one side of him, a shrill crackling- like thunder- starts up; when he glances in that direction, he spots the doorway being cut off by continues bolts of electricity, like the lasers they'd encountered before but louder and, most likely, more dangerous.

"Should we try to go back up?" Panther suggests, leaning back to look at the balcony they'd just abandoned, a move they'd only made because Akira had done it.

"If the alarms went off the moment we stepped in here, then that means we're getting closer to the treasure!" Mona whispers back at them hastily, despite the loud siren announcing their presence.

"Look for the intruders over there!" A female's voice calls out, just before a beam of light shines around the corner from the partition the four of them are hiding behind.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Skull hisses harshly. Akira turns towards his teammate just in time to see a flash of yellow and black rushing around the corner the light was coming from. He hears a grunt from his teammate and a noise of impact before he's able to get to his feet again and rush after him. Around the corner, Skull has his weapon out and is bludgeoning one of Madarame's guards. Akira moves into position to assist, driving his weapon into the things side until it falls completely quiet then disappears completely, falling into piles upon piles of ash and black slime around his knife and feet.

The next shadow appears behind them, carrying another flashlight that disappears as soon as Panther disarms him. It doesn't have a lot of time to alert the others, or make any noise, before Mona is leaping at it and creating a silver arch in the air is his sword strikes downwards quickly and silently. The shadow disintegrates into a small pile, leaving behind a small wad of cash that Akira doesn't have time to consider picking up before another shadow emerges from the other side. Together, he and Ryuji silence it before it can say anything.

The process continues, shadows emerging from his left and right at an increasing pace until he's getting slow, tired, and sweaty. There's a pause in which he moves them across the room, behind a partition in one of the room's far corners. Only then does he allow himself and the others a reprieve.

"The treasure must... Be right behind that door... If there's... This many shadows... Right, Morgana?" Skull pants out, using his pipe as something to lean on while they hide, his other bright yellow hand is rubbing beneath the plate covering his knee, leaving Akira further guilty about getting them into this situation before he'd seen it.

"It must be." Mona assures, heaving in deep breaths.

After a period, the shadows seem to have lost track of them completely, though Akira did still see their flashlights and silhouettes searching out the room when he chances a glance around the partition's corner. He turns to his teammates, looking for an answer or just hoping they'd flat out tell him what he should do, but he just finds them staring back at him, saying nothing, waiting on him to decide. He hates it.

Eventually, when his legs start working again, he leads them around the perimeter of the room, concealing them behind the corner of partitions and waiting for the shadows to walk far enough away to not notice them before they advance. They manage to get to the other end of the room, right before a set of doors, guarded by electricity and a stationary shadow, before he orders them to stop again; he's pretty sure he at least one more fight in him, especially if it means securing the treasure and, more importantly, getting out of this place.
Pointing at the shadow, his teammates don't hesitate before running towards it, using their weapons as leverage over its vitality. Despite the onslaught and Akira's desperate slashes at its shape, the shadow refuses to go down. To make matters worse, whatever force that guides his connection with Arsene and the others seems uncooperative, despite residing just within him, he can't seem to call any of them forth to help them with this fight.

The shadow, a massive snake with twin, human-like torsos sprouting from its tail, only falls after striking forward one last time, embedding it's twin swords straight through Takamaki's torso and thigh. The beast lets out a wail as Takamaki does, but has the fortune of starting to dissemble upon itself. Starting from the scales on its tail, the shadow starts turning into slime and ash while screaming all the while, it's harsh, hoarse voice seems to penetrate through him, vibrating everything inside of him. The very last thing to disappear are the fang-like weapons piercing through Takamaki's flesh, once they fade from existence, her form drops to the floor and Akira isn't quick enough to catch her before she drops completely.

"Ann!" Ryuji shouts out, rushing to her side but not quickly enough to stop her head from connecting with the floor. He lifts her onto his lap as she cries.

"Ryuji." She sobs out, trails of clear tears run dribble down from the inside of her mask. "It hurts!" She screams loudly.

"Zorro!" Morgana tries, "Zorro!" His persona flickers into being for all of a second before fading out again, leaving behind faint traces of blue fire as it does.

"I can't heal her!" He shouts, sounding just as pained as the girl on the floor.

Akira tries too, kneeling by his teammate as he tries to force that connection with his personas and summon their aid, but they refuse to manifest. To heal his teammate when he needs to.

*I need to do something!* He shouts at them, trying to get a response, but nothing comes.

"I can't summon her... She won't come..." Takamaki chokes out. It sounds painful for her to speak and he wishes that she'd just stop.

He needs to heal her, or find her a way to Takemi. He needs to do *something*. Akira is so stuck trying to panic that he doesn't feel the hand on his shoulder until it's almost crushing his shoulder, and he doesn't notice the weight in his pocket until it drops onto the floor and tumble onto the ground. At this point, he's willing to do anything to stop looking at the puddle starting to grow wider and wider around Takamaki's shaking form.

The thing that had fallen from his pocket was not the gemstone, like he'd been expecting, but something else entirely. Which, he supposes for an instant, could have been possible; his phone spawned from his bag and into the pocket of the jacket that appears when he enters the MetaVerse, and the things he takes from this place end up in his school bag.

With a gasp and trembling fingers, Akira lurches away from his, possibly fatally wounded, teammate and grabs at the container that's started to roll away. The edges of it are coated in Takamaki's blood, leaving streaks of crimson behind as it tumbles across the gallery's floor, and the label is almost too saturated in liquid that it's difficult to read, but Akira already knows what it is.

Something to take the pain away.

Unscrewing the cap, he crawls back to his writing teammate and shoves his fingers into the concoction, hoping that, if nothing else, he'd be able to stop her from crying while she bled to
death. The smell of mint pierces through the scent of blood and the tingling quality of the salve is something he can feel through the gloves on his hands. Akira pushes the Takemi's medicine through the gaping hole in his teammate's side.

Takamaki screams.

Akira tugs his hand back, afraid he's caused her even more pain, but watches, terrified, as the flesh starts pulling itself back together. The reddened insides pieces together with a hiss and trails of smoke start emanating from her torso.

"W-what" She howls out. Her glove, now red like his, latches onto his arm and he almost drops the container. "What is that?!

"It's healing her..." Skull whispers. "Keep going!" The blond pulls Takamaki's hand away from his arm and Akira follows the other's direction, dipping his fingers back into the mixture and turning it pink with blood. Takamaki gasps and squirms when he presses into the wound on her leg, the appendage jumps off the floor and nearly kicks him and Morgana in the face.

"You're doing good, Panther." The cat soothes, holding onto her other hand while she flips to her side. He presses the rest of the medicine onto the backsides of the wounds where the swords had pierced through his bone and flesh, the wounds sizzle and hiss, but her skin stretches out into pale, unscarred skin.

Despite her lack of wounds, Takamaki remains on the floor, gasping, with tears running down her face. The four of them remain silent as she does, though Akira does screw on the cap of the medicine, ignoring the squelching sound the cap makes as it swivels into place, and shoves it back into his pocket along with the gemstone.

"We need to get the fuck outta here." Skull instructs eventually. "We can't keep goin' like this."

Panther shakes her head, "I'm fine! The treasure is right there!" She points out, pointing towards the door that's no longer being guarded, either by shadows or pillars of electricity. When Akira turns back to his teammate, he finds her attempting stand, but her hands are tremble where they're planting against the tiles covered in her blood. Skull maneuvers around and under her, butting his head through the gap between her chest and arm before climbing to his feet. Akira can see his leg threatening to buckle, but he manages to help both of them to their feet before Akira can get to his own to offer his own assistance.

"She's probably right, it'll just be worse the next time we come here, won't it?" Skull asks, looking down the nose of his mask to stare at Morgana.

"Most likely." The cat respond, barely above a whisper.

"Let's go then, then we gotta get outta here." Ryuji adjusts the girl hanging over his shoulder and Akira moves towards the door, holding it open while the other walk through it. It snaps closed behind them with a click and Akira steps forward hesitantly, moving around the group of his teammates helping Panther walk towards the end of another long hallway.

The corridor is different than any that they'd been through thus far, it opens wide, with small fountains running along both walls then curling sharply around the corners, they splash quietly and constantly with running water below motifs of bamboo and gold etched into the walls. The light is dim, but golden and constant, bright enough that Akira doesn't worry about tripping or running into shadows as he leads the others through the walkway. The walkways goes on for some time, a long path that drains what's left of his energy, then turns into two directions before he knows it. One
path is cut off by a glass partition and the other opens up to an even larger set of fountains and motifs, with actual bamboo bending into the path before two large sets of doors.

Beyond the scent of blood and mint, Akira smells fresh grass and water, something he hadn't experienced since he'd left the countryside. It reminded him of his walks home from school, one of the few times he was ever truly alone. Beyond the massive doors, giant sliding ones with dark wood for handles that nobody could possibly reach let alone operate and soft, blue panels with golden flowers expanding outwards across them, Akira knows that the treasure has to be there, just behind these doors.

"S-shit." He hears from just behind him, right before the sound of bodies collapsing hits his ears. Quickly, he turns around, expecting the worse, but only finds Skull and Panther collapsed, the former is rubbing at his leg with an unpleasant expression on his face. The other is attempting to pull herself to her feet. Akira moves quickly, doing what Skull had done and putting himself under her shoulder for support; she was heavier than he'd been expecting, even more so when she leans into him.

"Thank god." She murmurs right into his cheek with a laugh, "Ryuji's just tall enough that it felt like he was dragging me over here instead of helping me."

Akira doesn't say anything, not that he could with both of his hands occupied with supporting his teammate, but follows her lead as she steps forward. He keeps his feet lined up with hers as she advances towards the massive door. When they finally step in front of it, he worries about how they might possibly get it open without their personas and without any energy to climb, the door slides open as if on its own, startling him as it grinds against the floor loudly. Behind it, what he's expecting to be a treasure, is just another, identical door to the one they'd just passed through. It, too, opens when Panther urges him forward. The one after that does, too.

Together, they pass through a series of identical looking doors, with no sight of the treasure. Maybe even a hundred. He has no way of knowing and is too exhausted to count.

Finally, the door open up to reveal something else. A field of red lasers, crisscrossing upon each other and almost as tall as he is guarding yet another massive door just beyond with no sign of a treasure.

"There has to be something..." Panther pleads right next to him.

"It's about fuckin' time those doors ended." Skull says from behind. In his arms, Panther jumps at the noise. "Only to reveal another door. This guy is seriously fucked in the head, or heart-whatever."

Mona walks past them and towards a pole he hadn't noticed until just now and begins reading from the plaque at the top. "All personnel: This door can only be opened via the security room that lies beyond it. Please be cautious as it is impossible to open from the outside."

"You gotta be shitting me!" Ryuji explodes suddenly, "So it's never s'posed to open then?"

"W-wait a second, Ryuji." Panther rasps into his ear, "Haven't we seen that door before?" She lifts her blood soaked hand towards the door just beyond the grid of lasers. The door is different than the set they'd just passed through. It has the same style, with a dark blue background and handles made of dark wood, but instead of bamboo and flowers, golden feathers are curling over each other and onto its twin, spreading themselves tall and wide.

Akira has never seen a door like this before.
"Oh yeah! It was in Madarame's house- the shack!" Skull analyses, also explaining why he hadn't seen it.

"Oh..." Mona states quietly.

"What is it, Mona?" Panther says, turning her head away from him to stare at their other teammate.

"Nothing good..." He promises, "It means we'll have to change Madarame's cognition before we can continue."

"Isn't that the point of stealing the treasure, though? To steal his heart." Panther counters loudly.

"Y-yes, but with some palaces... You have to change their real-world cognition to get further into their palace; in this case: it looks like we have to get Madarame to view that this door is open."

"That makes sense," Panther admits, just as Skull murmurs, "I thought you said you lost all your memories."

Akira doesn't hear what Morgana says to either response, too busy dealing with one thought.

We have to go back into the house.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, again, for the long wait, especially after I said I'd be updating more often.
Chapter 26

Akira is uncertain what to do next. The feeling is not new, but feels overwhelmingly so, given the situation. Communicating with others has never been a strong suit of his. No matter how quickly or neat his handwriting is, or how slow he signs, people find him to be inconvenient. In the face of that inconvenience, Akira has learned at least one thing: continuing to bother the people he's inconveniencing only leads to worse situations. Unfortunately, none of his prior rules seem applicable to the their situation.

If we don't intervene, Kitagawa-san is likely to die. The truth seems to slip across his consciousness without him so much as considering it; yet he knew it to be true.

Kitagawa was in danger. And the Phantom Thieves of Hearts were meant to stop it.

When he first agreed to taking Madarame as a target, he'd been under the impression that their interaction with him— the real Madarame— would be kept to a minimum to avoid suspicion. Now Morgana is telling them that they not only have to find a way back into the shack, but to do so with Madarame just behind them in order to change his palace.

There was also one other matter that had Akira's attention as he rides back to Yongen-Jaya. The empty canister of Takemi's medicine rolled between his fingers. It still has echoes of his presence on it, long, bloody marks in the shape of his hands that have soaked into parts of the label. The inside is empty, but stained pink where Takamaki's blood had mixed with the pale, white salve it held.

Her screams echo in his head without him attempting to remember them. Ear-piercing and loud enough that he thinks others might be able to hear it if they sit close enough to him.

Takemi is someone he also has to talk to. Her medicine saved their teammate, though he had no idea about how to tell the doctor that or where to start without informing her of what they are.

This is too much. Akira's brain supplies and not for the first time. Everything was starting to be overwhelming, not that he thought becoming a phantom thief or moving to a foreign location would be simple.

Sakura-san is standing behind the counter when Akira steps into LeBlanc and orders him to sit down with a wave of his hand. Akira is nearly asleep on his feet and falls, rather completely, onto his preferred seat. The leather and metal seem to creak in surprise at the sudden weight, but neither of those noises is enough to drown out the yelp his bag emits at the sudden drop.

He thinks about apologizing, but knows that Morgana wouldn't be able to see it and possibly wouldn't understand anyways. Instead, the bag remains zipped mostly closed as he drops his teammate in the seat next to him. There isn't much time to reconsider what he just did before Sakura-san drops a plate of curry onto the counter in front of him along with a cup of water.

"Your school called." His guardian says, suddenly enough that Akira fumbles with pulling the spoon towards his mouth. Curry splatters back onto his plate, staining the rice and sending droplets onto his school blazer. His stomach threatens to fall out from under him just as much his throat
"Grades came out today." Sakura-san explains next, just as quickly.

Is he upset with me? Akira has no way of telling. His caretaker doesn't look pleased, quite the opposite, with a deep frown and the ever piercing expression half-hidden behind his glasses. Things he only catches in glimpses when he works up the courage to glance up at the older man.

"I spent all day thinking about what a delinquent might want as a reward." The older man continues, striding to the far end of the counter and away from him, "Then I started thinking, 'how would a delinquent even get grades that high anyways?', which brings us here."

Sakura-san finally returns and slides a square piece of green cloth towards him.

"Well?" Sakura-san continues after a moment, all of which Akira has spent staring at his reward. "Open it." He commands.

As tired as his arms are, Akira moves quickly to comply. Unfolding the piece of fabric to reveal nothing but itself. The material, he supposes, is one that he should have recognized sooner as the man across from him is wearing an identical piece of it. The namesake of the cafe they're both sitting in is fastened onto the front of the apron in white, petite lettering.

"I figure if you're smart enough for that school, you're smart enough to learn a thing or two from me. Not tonight, of course, but whenever the cafe is empty I can give you some pointers." Akira isn't sure what to make of his reward, not that he isn't grateful, especially if it means he hasn't upset the older man, he just has no idea what it means.

"But, if your grades start slipping, you can forget about the whole thing. Coffee isn't something an idiot can learn, anyways. So if all of this was a big prank to get me to look the other way, you got another thing coming. Got that?" Akira nods quickly, even if he doesn't fully understand. Regardless, Sakura-san seems placated by his response and turns his back to him to head towards the cafe's small kitchen.

Akira attempts finishing his meal, but is both too tired and too anxious to eat anymore, and instead, scrapes the remains down the sink before cleaning off his dishes. Only then does he return to his seat to pick Morgana back up. Quietly, he slinks back into the attic.

That was strange. He can't help but thinking as he sinks into bed.

Arsene snorts quietly inside of him, a noise his brain is already filtering out as he falls asleep.

Akira wakes up the next morning with his uniform still on, which cuts off part of the schedule he'd set up. It only bothers him a little bit, not enough to change into something else so he can get dressed into what he's already wearing. Morgana, he notices, is still sleeping, even through the alarm and he wonders if he should find it odd; his teammate, for the most part, goes to sleep and awakens on nearly the same schedule as he does.

He considers leaving the other in the attic, at least for the day. He has no intentions of going into the MetaVerse today, palace or otherwise, so it wouldn't be harmful for Morgana to stay behind.

After a moment of consideration, Akira does just that. He carefully extracts Morgana's feline form from where it's still half inside of his schoolbag and quietly exits the attic.

The lack of weight that often threatens to topple him to one side is not one he thought he'd grow familiar to, yet as he heads towards the station Akira finds it almost difficult to walk without trying
to adjust to the weight of another. Sitting at his desk is another matter he didn't think Morgana's absence would require adjusting to; he could actually use the inside of his desk, though he neglects storing anything inside of it.

All of the small things seem to stack up inside of him in a place he hadn't known existed, a sensation that didn't feel quite right; there was a sinking in his stomach that he couldn't identify the source of, which only amplified the uneasiness he felt about his entire situation.

*I need to get into contact with Kitagawa-san.* It is a thought that ghosts over him between lessons and sometimes during them. That realization is also accompanied by the feeling of warm blood soaking into his fingers. He also needs to find a way to change Madarame's cognition on a door he didn't know existed. And he needs to contact Takemi. And Iwai at some point.

*This is too much.* Akira is certain of that, if nothing else. Part of him doubted he'd be able to work all of these things out, that he wouldn't be able to escape the ruin that Igor had told him about, that he wouldn't be able to help Kitagawa-san or anybody else. But he had to try; Takamaki and Arsene had informed of that much.

He didn't bother returning to the cafe as soon as school is done. Instead, he walks past it and stands in front of Takemi's clinic. The nails on his fingers, which had healed at some point and were no longer painful, sank into the palms of his hands and refused to unclench no matter how many deep breaths he takes.

The door, unlike LeBlanc's- or anywhere else in Tokyo it seemed- doesn't ring or announce his presence in anyway, yet Takami, who'd been sitting behind the counter that separated one work area from the other, looks up as he steps inside and Akira's nerve threatens to unravel on itself. Keeping his gaze locked onto the counter, his focus narrows onto an unusual dark spot on the otherwise blank plane, he approaches the other.

If she's surprised to see him, she doesn't mention anything and Akira doesn't catch anything when he manages to glance in her direction.

Her mouth opens with an audible pop, but words don't come for a long moment. Another one that makes his knees threaten to buckle underneath him.

"Head into the exam room." Takemi instructs quietly just before a long sheath of material covers the upper half of the counter, effectively creating a wall between them.

Akira moves to follow her instructions, but halts at the door to take another deep breath before heading inside. Takemi is quickly in front of him, materializing out of nothing and startling him enough that he doesn't react to her hands grabbing onto his face.

"You don't look fatally wounded." She notes quietly as she twists his head one way then the other. Her hands still, "I assumed that would be the only condition in which you walked back in here. Either that or in a body bag." Takemi's smile is sudden and sharp, it reminds him a bit of Sakamoto's, though the blond has never been quite as intense as the woman before him.

"So, quiet one, what brings you to my house of horrors?" Takemi finally asks. "Not a social visit, I presume?"

*House of horrors?* His mind snags regardless, in which he attempts to sign on reflex. When he realizes it, shame courses through him, along with the weight of doubt that makes it hard to move his fingers.
Akira fumbles with his phone and wishes he'd planned this interaction out more before attempting it; he almost wished she'd turned him away as soon as he'd walked through the door. He hadn't been expecting this at all.

"Medicine." Akira tries, not sure what else to say. He needed to know how it worked, how it had replicated the near-fantastical abilities of the MetaVerse, so much so that a pain-relieving spread can close bleeding wounds in moments.

She pulls the phone from his shaking fingers and sets it on the desk right behind her, out of his reach. He supposes it's in her right, he'd come to her for help and answers, yet that didn't stop another flood of panic from spreading further into him.

"You want my medicine?"

You're head bobs forward once, then refuses to come back up. Takemi's boot taps rapidly.

"You shouldn't need another shipment for another month or so... Unless I miscalculated the doses, of course. That would be convenient, wouldn't it?" She says quite loudly. Akira isn' t sure what to say to that and is almost grateful when she takes a seat and points towards the bed just from across it. "Take a seat."

Akira is reluctant to remove the distance that had been created between them, yet follows her instructions without hesitation. They need this. He sits down on the edge of the bed, right across from Takemi, and only startles a little at the crinkling of the mattress beneath him.

"It's strange." Takemi continues. The doctor folds forward on herself, minimizing the distance between them once more as she rests her elbows on her knees and dropping her face into his line of sight. "The quiet basket case suddenly appearing in front of me, tugging on my heartstrings but refusing my help to the point where I have to blackmail him into coming in for a checkup is asking for my medicine. It's all pretty convenient, and you really did have me fooled."

Fooled? Had he let something slip with noticing?

"So, which one of them sent you?" She asks him.

Sent? Arsene stirred slowly inside of him, drawing closer to the surface but remaining silent.

"Well, I don't care either way." Takemi informs him, leaning back marginally, she continues in a harsh whisper, "You can tell Oyamada or Fukuda, or whoever sent you that 'The Plague' is still here."

Akira isn't sure what to say to that. He didn't know either of those people.

"Then again, they must have known that." Her fingernails, dark, purple and pointed, trail across the darkened screen of his phone. "They wouldn't send some kid to spy on me without good reason, either. I'm surprised they even care that much."

Takemi turns back to him and seems to acknowledge his presence for the first time since he'd walked in. "Seems rather merciful, sending me warm body to experiment on. Though you'd look much better with a ribbon tied around that useless neck of yours."

Akira's heart sinks, along with his stomach and wondered if it was possible if he'd made a mistake in coming here.

"How's this sound?" Takemi offers, "You play as my guinea pig every few days or so, I write you a
"little note on what 'The Plague' is doing for your boss, and I'll sell you a few of my remedies."

He glances towards the phone still locked between him and the doctor between him.

"A simple yes or no will do." She instructs as if she was able to see where he was looking and what he was thinking.

Akira nods out of desperation to leave more so than getting his hands on what he came for. He's had more than enough at this point.

"Everything is settled then." She smiles then finally hands him back his phone. The temptation to bolt is still strong, the door isn't that far away either, yet he can't manage to get past the wall of confusion that's been built inside of him, blocking him off from running out and never looking back.

"I don't know who Oyamada or Fukuda is or what the plague is. Sorry for bothering you." He's not sure why he apologizes other than he knows he should and his hands, along with the rest of his body, seem to continuously tremor in fear as he hands it over hoping that it'd be enough to sate the doctor into forgetting about this interaction completely. Even without saying anything, he'd somehow managed to turn another adult against him.

Was he truly that disturbing?

"What?" Takemi says. Her hand curls around his phone but then retracts as she continues once more, "You're not here to spy?"

Spy? Akira shakes his head quickly.

Takemi stares at him for a long time, seeming to be at a loss for speech. "You just want... medicine."

He nods, though he wasn't sure about that anymore.

Takemi leans forward again, messy black hair tumbles forward and brushes against his leg. She doesn't say anything and doesn't pull herself up for a long time. Akira wonders if that means he's meant to leave but when he shifts to step away from the other, the doctor's form pulls straight back in her chair until she's upright once more and staring right at him.

"I... Owe you an apology." Takemi announces, "I was so certain that you were with someone else and I lost myself because of it. I said horrible things to you because of that; I am deeply sorry. I hope that you can forgive me." She bows forward in her seat.

Akira isn't sure if he should and Arsene remains quietly present at the forefront of his senses, refuses to answer for him. He has no reason not forgive her. Up until today, she'd helped him out without asking for anything in return. He wondered, instead, if it should be him asking for forgiveness and not the other way around, it certainly wouldn't be the first time someone had accused him of being something he wasn't and he doubted, for the next eleven months- and maybe for a long time afterwards- that it would be the last.

When he nods, Takemi sighs and seems to deflate in her chair. Like this, Akira can't help but look at her, the uncomfortable sensation when he stares into her eyes is all but absent for reasons he can't grasp nor wants to. The doctor stares back at him with wide, brown eyes.

"You- um, you should leave." She says quietly, "I need to be alone for a while. Come back in a few days if you still want some of my medicine."
Akira nods in reply, then pulls himself to his feet. They feel uncertain under him, like they might collapse as he stumbles towards the door to the exam room. He does not turn around to say goodbye, and Takemi doesn't comment on it, and continues walking until he's just outside the doors of the clinic until he finds himself suddenly standing in beams of bright sunlight. He finds himself unable to take another step forward and collapses onto the stony steps just outside. There's an unusual sensation at the bottom of his stomach, nothing like guilt or shame; he's unable to point a finger to what it might be, and finds himself feeling even worse because of it.

Did I do something wrong? Skims across his consciousness again and again. Arsene, nor any of the others residing with him, deign him with an answer. Suddenly, he wished he could return home. The feeling does not fade, no matter how long he sits there, no matter how many clouds wash through the sky.

When he returns to LeBlanc, Sakura-san is standing behind the counter despite the lack of customers and frowns when he steps inside causing the cigarette in his mouth to flick downwards. Akira considers leaving again, but Sakura-san waves him over before he can maneuver himself out of the cafe.

"Shop's empty." The man says as Akira walks towards his seat. He's about to deposit himself in when Sakura-san waves him over once again. "I figure now's a good time to start those lessons, eh?"

The words ripple coolly against his neck, making the hairs stand on their ends. Akira hates lessons, but realizes he doesn't have much of a choice and quickly- or as quickly as his legs can manage- joins the other man behind the counter, not sure what to expect.

"There's probably not a lot of time before a few of my regulars show up, so we'll hammer home some of the basics and then you can run off wherever, okay?" Still lost, Akira nods anyway when his guardian looks over at him. Sakura-san leans his back against the counter and stares at the racks of shelves behind the counter. Akira draws his attention to them as well. Each rack is filled with glass jars, each jar has a different label that he can't quite make out; he doesn't dare step closer to read them though as the older man continues speaking.

"There's three different type of coffee roasts, that you need to know about anyway. It goes like this, light, medium, and dark. Simple, right?" Sakura-san asks, turning his head towards him again.

Akira nods once more.

"Light roast." The older man steps forward and grabs a jar from the topmost shelf and places it onto the counter behind him. "It's the most acidic of the bunch, the beans aren't cooked very long before they ship it out, is what that means." Sakura-san pulls a device made of glass from underneath the counter, then another, before uncapping the jar. Spoonful after spoonful is scooped into the top end of the first device before Sakura-san turns his attention- as well as Akira's- to the second one. With a flick of a switch, the device seems to roar to life, spluttering and releasing puffs of smoke or steam; he isn't sure which.

Sakura-san remains quiet for a period, staring intently at the machine as it continues quietly humming. The older man remains statue-like until the machine finally makes a different noise and finally turns quiet. Akira watches as the older man lifts up the second device and tips it over the second device, releasing a wave of steaming water. It catches at the top of the device and slowly, drip by drip, dark water catches in the bottom of the glass chamber.

It seemed quite complicated for making coffee. He'd seen it made at home quite a few times, but
with only through a single machine. Compared to that, Sakura-san's process was endlessly perplexing.

Coffee pooled in the glass chamber until the container was completely full of a light brown liquid; it was nearly see through, but not quite. It carried, of course, the same aroma that remained perpetual in LeBlanc, though much stronger than it normally was.

Sakura-san moves towards the sink and Akira watches him pull two cups from where they were kept, stacked neatly on a large shelf above the sink. The older man returns to their shared space and places them on the counter to quickly fill them with the still steaming liquid.

One is slid towards him, making the liquid stir and twist upon itself. Akira grabs onto the handle the same way he catches Sakura-san doing and lifts it to his lips. It's warm- hot even- and slides over his tongue in bitter trails.

Sakura-san sips once more, then turns to face him. Akira keeps his stare firmly into his cup of coffee. "Light roast has distinct qualities, you know. It has more caffeine in it, since it's cooked very little. It's also much lighter than the others, so it's easy to tell the difference between this one from the others."

The coffee jar is put back onto the shelf and Sakura-san replaces it with another one, pulled down from a shelf just below it. "Medium roast." His guardian points out as it brews. It's darker and not as bitter than the one before it; Akira finishes that one more quickly than the previous one. The older man is about to take a third jar off when a loud noise makes him freeze.

"So-chan!" A lady calls from the door. Sakura-san sighs and, not turning back towards him, waves him towards the attic. Akira does as he's told, thinking that it hadn't been as bad as he'd thought it would be. Sakura-san wasn't a nice man, but that didn't mean he was a mean or bad one, or he thinks at least. There's a lot he doesn't know about his guardian, something that could he could say about everyone in his life, but the older man hadn't been cruel to him as far as he could tell.

Truthfully, he was still reeling from the things that Takemi had said to him; the accusations and glares that made him want to find a way to reverse time. Perhaps that's why he found Sakura-san's demeanor less hostile; a part of him was convinced that dealing with the doctor, someone who knew about his past and confronted him about it, would be easier than dealing with guardian.

He had been wrong in both cases.

It was frustrating, but more than anything, it left him lost in how to approach the situation with Kitagawa and Madarame. If Morgana was to be believed, infiltrating the palace itself would be even more difficult once the cognitive change was made, but even before that, Akira had only interacted with the man once and had no clue how he'd convince the artist to view a cognitive barrier as non-existent.

Akira was out of his depth. More so than he was comfortable with. That knowledge made his skin crawl in foreboding way, thoughts of Suzui flickered forwards from his memories, replaced with Kitagawa's face and form.

Morgana’s greeting pushed those thoughts away, dampening the picture enough for him to resume functioning. He continues across the attic's landing and lets himself topple against the mattress in the corner and narrowly avoids crushing his teammate while doing so. He feels tired; drained. He hadn't done much, there was no dashing across cognitive landscapes or flooding his body with flight-or-flight hormones- at least for the most part- he didn't walk any more quickly than he had to, yet Akira couldn't deny the distinct heaviness that had started in his head and somehow filtered
downwards without notice.

"Joker." He hears faintly as he climbs fully onto the bed and under the covers. Akira finds himself unable to respond, having fallen over the edge of sleep.

Akira spends the next day- Sunday- recovering. His mind more so than his body, though the latter is still sore from sneaking and fighting through Madarame's palace. Something he definitely feels when he bends over into the washing machines to clean his uniform or when he scrubs at his back in the bathhouse right next door, though he'd rather spend hours doing either of those activities than explaining to Morgana why he'd abandoned him the previous day. Each question, and sometimes insults, left his head pounding and added to the distinct feeling that he'd done something wrong, that he was living quite incorrectly without realizing it. Ever since Takemi had cornered him the day before, he couldn't quite shake the impression and wondered if Morgana resented him the same way the doctor seemed to.

Iwai, another adult Akira was nervous about talking with- though much less so than either Takemi or Sakura-san- wants to meet up with him soon, the clerk tells him as much with a text late on Sunday, long after the trains have stopped running. Despite his tentative trust, or whatever it was that he had, for the older man, Akira found himself lingering outside the alleyway that lead to Untouchable after school the next day. People careen past him, some wearing uniforms, some not though he finds himself counting them in an attempt to pass the time. Iwai had never said what time he should show up, only that he should, and Akira found himself wondering if this, too, would end up being a door he wished he'd never walked through.

"There is little point in stalling the inevitable, little thief." Arsene's baritone growls without malice. His voice makes him jump regardless. Akira knows the other is right, yet finds himself warm in the face at having been caught; he'd nearly forgotten that others dwell within him aside from himself. Fortunately, it was only Arsene that spoke out about his behavior.

With a gulp, one that rolls almost painfully down his throat, Akira pushes the shop's door open and steps towards the counter. Like the last time he'd been in, the clerk stands and waves him around the counter. He navigates around dusty displays and piles of boxes until he's reentering the backroom.

It's brighter than it had been last time, with bright ceiling lights and multiple lamps adorning the waist-height counters that circle around the room. It's dusty, like the shop itself, though Akira finds himself not minding at all. He wonders when that had changed; his mother was particular about a clean, dust-free home and had instilled in him- or so he thought- the same practice quite fiercely.

Rubbing at his neck, Akira turns his attention to the clerk, who has his back to him and had, without him noticing, moved to stand in front of one piece of the wall-wrapping desk. Akira stays by the door, not sure if he should join the other man or not.

"They're nothing special, market value stuff, but after a few minutes back here, I whipped 'em into shape pretty good I gotta say." The man says suddenly with a sniff, nearly making him jump. Iwai takes a step back and extends a gloved hand towards the desk. On it are several un-packaged weapons- models- that looked quite real, as far as he could tell anyway. Morgana, hanging from his shoulder, whistled and drew Iwai's attention away from him.

"He an enthusiast, too?" The other man asks, something he only half hears through the loud pumping of blood all across his body. Impressive as they were, with trimmings made of silver and gold- though Akira couldn't tell if it was real or not- and shiny, straight plates of gleaming metal, the guns -models, he reminds himself once more- stand quite imposing and definitely realistic, more than enough to remind him of his apprehension in bringing one, or more, back to LeBlanc.
"Er," Iwai coughs, making him realize that he hadn't responded to the man's question in any way besides staring.

Akira bows, both in thanks and in apology, and Iwai seems to accept it by handing him one of the guns on the work desk. It refracts under the numerous lights and is nearly blinding. It's also surprisingly heavy when he finally steps forward and takes it into his hands. Akira doesn't know a lot, almost nothing, about guns and weapons, fake or not, but he couldn't help but wonder if Iwai had been dishonest with him. The gun was small, bigger than the one he currently used, but still quite small. The back part, where his palm rested when he wielded it, was ridged with black plastic that made the weight from the metal pieces seem almost negligible. The sides were etched in uniform patterns of vines with large, angular thorns that curled around the barrel's boxy casing.

It looked incredibly artsy and new, like something that might belong in an exhibit and not in Akira's hands, and certainly not in the MetaVerse.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself." Iwai says. Akira's gut starts biting at him. He didn't belong here. "It's an American model, if you didn't know. I trimmed the sides down on the grip safety, side lock too. Replaced the sights with a custom design, glow in the dark for all that matters. Slide is reinforced for rapid-fire precision, pretty sure you could shoot a fly with this thing, even if it is a bit girly- not that that's a bad thing- but engraving a gun affects the weight in ways you wouldn't believe."

There's something in the way the other man speaks that makes Akira feel quite strange, and not in a bad way. Though it's not until he manages a glance upwards at the clerk that he draws some understanding. Iwai was smiling while saying all of that, smiling at him, or the model in his hand. He didn't seem displeased with him at all, didn't stalk forward and say things that left him confused, for the most part. The clerk talked about his work, with him, and smiled while doing so.

The price had been unexpected, both higher and lower than what his brain was estimating. The gun was customized beautifully, perfect in ways that made Akira feel unwelcome to touch it, and was one a kind of Iwai was to be believed, yet made for him and made to be used, to be rolled around his hands and admired. Using part of the money they'd picked up from Madarame's palace, Akira purchased it and quickly offers his thanks.

"See ya, glasses." Iwai nods. Akira exits the shop surprised; the other man hadn't brought up their strange meeting from the other day, they just talked about guns that was it. The clerk was intense and seemed quite dangerous, yet was easy to be around in the same way that Sakamoto and Takamaki were. There was still a lot he didn't understand about him- or his teammates- but the feeling of belonging he felt near them was not something he could argue against. Compared to Takemi and Sakura-san, or being at school or even at home, spending time with the Untouchable's clerk was almost mundane, and if the man wasn't years and years older him, Akira might have considered the interactions quite normal; the older man hadn't suddenly turned on him either, hadn't offered him help or suddenly gave him rewards.

People are strange. He can't help but comment to himself, but Arsene hums in answer anyways. Akira pays little mind to his other self, though, and takes his time returning to LeBlanc.

The cafe is partially full when he steps inside of it and a number of customers look up when he steps inside. It's an uncomfortable sensation and one that he quite desperately escapes by crossing across the cafe and climbing back into the attic. There, he cradles his recent purchase for a moment before tucking it under the bed and into the far corner along with the other model he currently had, then climbs onto the mattress with Morgana just in front of him.

"That guy was something else." His teammate comments while bending forward in a stretch,
"There were so many... and the one you bought was something else, too."

Akira nods, unsure of what he should say in return to that, or what to make of Morgana's unusual tone.

"Though," Morgana continues, turning to face him. Ocean blue eyes beam up at him, "I can do stuff like that too, you know? Well, in my old body, anyway." Akira isn't sure what to make of that statement either. The black cat in his lap continues to look up at him, trying to catch his gaze, but Akira keeps looking firmly at the lock of hair betwixt his fingers and says nothing.

"I could teach you." Catches Akira's surprise. Morgana seems to notice and continues with bravado, "Better than standing around in a dusty shop! I'll teach you what it means to be a real phantom thief. One who relies on his tools more than his weapons!"

Akira nods once more, unsure of what else to do. Where Iwai had remained consistent, it seemed that everyone was changing around him and Akira was only noticing when it was too late.

Morgana hops off the bed and stalks around for a moment, spinning in circles one way while his tail swished in the opposite direction. Akira wondered if the cat was secretly two people trapped in a cat's body or if all cats- or humans turned into cats- were capable of doing that. He wasn't sure how to broach the question and found himself flinching when Morgana's voice calls out to him, beckoning him towards the corner of the room where a wooden desk was. Akira replaces his current spot for the one at the desk and Morgana is quick to fill the silence his own voice had stopped filling.

"What to do, what to do..." The cat murmured. This close, Akira could see the whiskers on his teammate's face wiggling as he paced back and forth across the small desk. It was odd. Both the wiggling and the fact that he was this close to another person.

Morgana reaches outwards and paws open one of the desk's small drawers, exposing bits of metal and dust. "Aha! Perfect." He all but purrs.

The cat turns back to him, "A gun might be proficient in combat, but a trademark of being a phantom thief is their arsenal to avoid it altogether."

Akira thought that sounded pleasant. Avoiding fights would allow them to find the treasure without the constant fear that at any moment-

"Joker, are you listening to me?" Morgana snaps, fierce enough that Akira jerks in place and offers a hasty nod. His teammate eyes him up, ocean blue gaze drifting over him uncomfortably before turning away. "Like I was saying, start pairing these up while I find- it was around here somewhere..."

Doing as he's told, Akira reaches into the small drawer that Morgana had open- the first of many- and pulls out a bundle of small, metal rods; each is about as long as a pencil and when grouped up resemble the same thickness. They're quite rusty as well, leaving residue to transfer onto his fingers as he starts making pairs of them on the desk.

"Aha!" Morgana exclaims again before dropping back down onto the surface of the desk and scattering the majority of the pairings he'd just made. The cat glances beneath him, causing the object clenched between his jaws to collide with the desk and further separating the piles he'd just made.

Dropping the object, Morgana looks back up at him with a displeased expression. "I thought I told
you to group these up."

Saying nothing, Akira does so again, grouping the rust-coated rods into pairs beside each other.

Only when he's finished does Morgana continue speaking, "Good work. Now, I want you to take this and start bending one from each pair, pretty far from the edge, but not quite in the middle." Akira picks up the tool that Morgana had found, it resembles a pair of scissors but with broad, metal planes where the blades were meant to go; pliers, if he recalls correctly. Morgana eyes flit down to his hands as he picks up the first piece of metal and watches quite closely as he starts to bend it.

"Not there." Morgana calls out just as the metal starts to curve. Akira releases the tension in his hands, almost sending the tool and metal clattering against the desk. He adjusts his grip and moves the tool further towards the middle, keeping an eye on Morgana for instruction as he does so.

"That should be good, maybe a little to the left- just a bit." The cat nods. Akira lets out a breath and starts bending the tool again, curving the metal until Morgana sharply tells him to stop.

"Okay, now pick up the other one and kind of..." Paws race towards his face and Akira leans away from them. Morgana's digits wiggle back and forth wordlessly. "Like that, you know?"

Akira doesn't know; he shakes his head.

Morgana sighs, "Okay, we'll do a simple one. Close to the edge, start bending it again." He was certain that nothing about this was simple, but didn't express as much, just followed Morgana's instructions, bending one end of the small rod until it formed a small lip.

"Good job, Joker." Morgana compliments, Akira thinks it sounds quite mocking as he says this. "Lockpicks are a must for a phantom thief, and it never hurts to have a few backups, just in case. These things look pretty brittle as it is... So maybe you should just use up the rest of these now and then maybe I'll teach you something else."

Akira bobs his head forward in a nod and starts to getting to work on another pair, only for them to snap quite loudly in his hands and crumble onto the desktop. Morgana makes a noise, but tells him to keep practicing. The next pair, he manages to get one end of it curved but the other falls into pieces as soon as he picks it up.

He keeps working through the pairs, though, because Morgana had asked him to.

"I was gonna teach you all this stuff when I got my body back, it would have been easier if I could show you what to do." Morgana says quietly and suddenly. Akira chances a glance up and finds Morgana prone on one of the desk's shelves. He shifts his attention back down when his teammate continues, "All of this would be a lot of easier if that happened. I could help more in the palace, help the boss downstairs, help Lady Ann with her homework..."

Homework? Had Takamaki said anything about having troubles? He wasn't sure; nor was he sure why that thing had him stuck. Morgana had helped them plenty, even saved their lives.

"I just feel..." Morgana growled suddenly, cutting himself off. "I'm not sure how I feel, actually."

Akira crosses the attic, but returns just as quickly with his cell phone in hand.

"You help plenty." More than enough, if he's being honest, though he's not sure why he didn't say exactly that. The cat didn't need to stay with him, didn't need to help them in palaces or combat, he didn't need to stay at LeBlanc and teach him these things.
Morgana gasps, drawing Akira's attention away from himself. "Joker..." Nothing comes out of his teammate's mouth, even as Akira continues working through the other to-be-formed lockpicks. Nor does anything come out of his mouth when Akira finishes with the last of them and gets ready for bed.

The next time his teammate speaks to him is the following morning when Sakamato and Takamaki end up on the rooftop with food in their hands.

"Lady Ann!"

Takamaki takes a seat to one side of him and Sakamato sits in front of both of them, half exposed to the sunlight beaming down onto the roof. Akira shifts a little away from both of them, space that Morgana immediately takes up as his own. He's not sure what to make of the behavior, but chooses to ignore it for the time being; the others had a reason for coming up here, otherwise they wouldn't.

*Maybe they're finally quitting.* Akira wonders silently, glancing between the two newcomers. He wouldn't blame them if they did.

"So I been thinkin'." Sakamato starts. Takamaki jumps in as soon as he does, "We've been thinking." She stresses.

Ryuji's foot slides back. "It's about phantom thief stuff, 'course. So I- We were thinkin' about ways we could get into Madarame's place with him in it, 'cause it's not like he lives there, so he must not show up that often."

"That's just a theory, Ryuji, maybe he has a safe or something that we just couldn't find. Or maybe whatever is behind that door is where he keeps his jewelry and stuff." Takamaki interjects once again, tearing open a boxed lunch as she does so.

"That makes some sense." Morgana agrees, "That jewel was pretty close to where we found that door, so that could be true... That still doesn't explain why it wasn't behind it, though."

"It also explains why it'd be locked." Sakamato continues, "Hey, maybe that's where Madarame keeps all the food, too!"

Akira's stomach gnaws rather painfully at that. He's forgotten that Madarame's kitchen had been completely empty. Or perhaps he'd just chose to ignore it. He wasn't sure, but the reminder felt as if someone had punched his stomach quite hard.

"A-anyways, Akira," Takamaki stammers, "It would make the most sense if either you or I made contact with Kitagawa-kun. He told me when we went to that exhibit that Madarame comes by everyday after the it closes to check on him."

"So we need to be there when he does show up..." Morgana finishes.

"I'm not sure how comfortable you'd be modeling for him again, if it were me, I'd be freaking out." She confesses with a huff, "But he's seemed really... taken with you, I guess is how I'd put it."

"Don't say it like that!" Ryuji splutters. Under the sun, Akira can see his teammate's cheeks and ears starting to turn red. Scratching at his neck, Ryuji continues, "But... It might work, if we could get that door open somehow and show Madarame. I think our best bet at getting through that thing."

"If Joker's going to be the bait, though, we'd need someone to be inside the palace to get through the door as the cognition changes." Morgana advises, drawing into a low stretch that has him
curling against Takamaki's leg.

"You mean it won't stay open, Morgana? Even after we show Madarame?"

Morgana shakes his head, rubbing against the floor, "It's unlikely. What would you do if someone opened a door you never wanted open?"

Takamaki sighs, "Close it..."

Sakamoto leans forward, something Akira only catches when the blond's hand lands on his leg and makes him flinch. His teammate's gaze is hard, with wide-open eyes. Akira can't even look in the other boy's direction. He fixates on a half-crushed can a few meters away, slowly swaying in the breeze and listens to his teammate as he speaks in low tones.

"You're the leader, dude, but I really think this is our best shot, y'know?" Akira doesn't know, not at all.

"I'll stay with whoever is going to open the door, I know my way around a lock or two, don't you think, Joker?" He wonders if Morgana knew this was going to happen.

"I've never picked a lock before..." Takamaki admits. Sakamoto chimes in as well, "Same."

"Rock, paper, scissors?" Takamaki suggests.

"Seriously?" She hums quietly in reply. "Whatever."

Ryuiji's hand pulls of his leg and Akira watches as the game unfolds next to him.

"It's probably for the best. I am his manager, after all." She laughs as she wins.

The blond leans back with a sigh, stretching further into the sunlight until he's flat on his back. Akira thinks he looks quite like Morgana like this. "Yeah, yeah. Stupid asshole would probably call the cops on me anyway."

Takamaki leans back too, her shoulders colliding with the stone wall behind them. She lets out a sigh as well. "When should we do it, though? The exhibit is only open for another week, I think. Who knows when Madarame will check on Kitagawa-kun once that's finished."

"Probably when he finishes another painting." Ryuji answers towards the sky, "Or when he finally croaks."

Takamaki's leg juts out quickly, surprising him just as much as it seems to Sakamoto. "Don't say stuff like that!"

"He is right, Lady Ann." Morgana stammers out, "The longer we wait, the more danger he's in."

"Don't you think I know that?" She explodes. "I was the one who said we needed to hurry and find this stupid treasure!"

Akira shrinks into himself the best he can without drawing anyone's attention. It seems to work.

"Don't you think I feel guilty enough about Shiho? How I couldn't do anything until I followed you guys? Now it's my fault that Kitagawa could die?" She sniffs through her yelling. Akira still can't manage to look over at her. Though he knows he should, Morgana would just have to yell at him for his lack of leadership later though.
"You got stabbed, Ann!" Ryuji explodes just as suddenly. The blond rockets into an upright position, "You coulda died! You might have if it weren't for him!" His teammate barks, throwing a hand up and pointing it towards him.

That didn't work. Akira judges, tries to sink even smaller into his uniform.

"I'm okay now." Takamaki whispers quietly enough that he wouldn't be surprised if Sakamato had heard it at all. The sudden shift has his head spinning. It seemed that, all of a sudden, Takamaki wasn't angry. She wasn't yelling and neither was Sakamato. She continues, taking in low tones as if they'd been thrown back into the MetaVerse. "I am. I've been talking with someone. I just want this to be over. I want-"

Ryuji picks up where the other had trailed off, "You told someone?" His voice cracks with the accusation.

Takamaki's form jerks up. "You mean about us being phantom thieves? How we fight monsters nobody else can see and change hearts?"

"Uh... Yeah?" Ryuji retorts.

Takamaki huffs. "Do you think I'd be here if I did? That I- that we wouldn't be in some hospital somewhere or maybe even jail?" Akira's chest seizes painfully as she says this and forces himself to sit still, to not run. Again, he wouldn't blame her if she had done that. Takamaki didn't deserve what had happened, Sakamato didn't deserve it either; they were just trying to help people, either Morgana or Kitagawa-san. Their actions shouldn't have resulted how they did.

"He's just... I talk to someone about my life, about Shiho mostly. You three don't even come up most of the time. I just need someone to talk to about everything and it's not like either of you-" She trails off abruptly with a sniffle. One that is immediately followed by more pronounced ones. Suddenly, he's even more uncomfortable than he had been just moments prior; he'd officially lost all control over the situation, if he'd any to begin with.

"Ann..." Sakamato says softly. "I- er, I'm pretty shit at talkin' about feelings an' all, I didn't even know you felt... like that. But if you need to talk, or like, someone to feed you ice cream, 'Kira an' I are here for ya, you know?"

"Kira?" Akira thinks at the same time Takamaki questions it out loud, her voice catches as her body shakes.

"Y'know, 'Kira-Akira, him right there." He catches Sakamato's hand lifts from his lap to point at him. Akira keeps his gaze firmly away from his teammates, still attempting to grasp the conversation going on around him.

"'Kira, huh?" Takamaki sniffs. Akira feels her looking in his direction. "Yeah, I guess... Maybe I should have said something."

"Yeah." Sakamato agrees quickly.

"You should have too, you know!" She crows suddenly, throwing a finger to point at the blond, "You didn't even ask if I was okay!"

"M-me?" Ryuji stutters, "I knew you weren't okay! I could see right through you!"

"Still, you could have asked!"
Ryuji groans, throwing his body back until he's flat against the rooftop again, "Fine, next time you get stabbed, I'll ask if you're okay before I start freakin' out, okay?"

Takamaki, for reasons unknown to him, laughs when Sakamato says this. "Really? I figured you'd just take the easy way out and take it for me, just to save yourself the trouble."

Sakamato is quiet after that, then he sighs. "I would, you know."

"Would what?" Takamaki questions.

"I'd jump in front of a sword, or a spear, or a gun or whatever." The blond says to the sky.

"Ryuji." His teammate croaks out. Ryuji cuts her off. "I was scared shitless, too, Ann. When I saw your face and all that blood, I was- I couldn't do anything to help. I'd rather be on the ground than see you like that again."

Something in his chest squeezes painfully at his teammate's words. He'd felt it too, in that instant; knowing that his teammate was going to die. If he hadn't thrown Takemi's medicine in his bag that day, if he hadn't managed to summon it or hadn't stopped the trembling in his hands, she would have. For that, he feels it sharply when Ryuji suddenly expresses that doubt. It makes him think back to when he'd met up with the blond and he'd told him that they were similar after all, that they felt the same things.

Was this what he meant? Akira asks himself. Surely it must be. He thinks back to the other things that his teammate had said, about truth and life, and comes to another conclusion as well. He would do the same thing that Ryuji had just confessed to, for either of them, and for Morgana as well. If only to avoid the fear that would happen next, that maybe they wouldn't have the tools to save each other if something bad were to happen in a place where nobody could find them.

A sudden warmth spread through him starting in his veins and expanding outwards until it seemed to consume him as he thought about his teammates, that he'd throw himself into the way of harm to avoid seeing them injured and having to deal with what happened after. Akira wondered if that's what it meant to be selfish, completely and utterly.

The bell rings before he has an answer, but he spends the rest of the afternoon working towards one, even risking distraction on the train towards Yongen-Jaya to continue thinking about it.

What does it mean when you're willing to get hurt for others?

Chapter End Notes

So I've been working on a new writing style thing called a schedule. Normally, I write an entire chapter up in a single day and post it. For this chapter I decided to write a section and then continue the next day and the day after that. Let me know what you think.

Also, I've been meaning to ask but I keep forgetting. If there's any tags that I'm missing, please let me know.
As always, thanks for reading and reviewing. It makes me happy.
It rains for the next two days and Akira spends both of them still unsure what to say to Kitagawa. He rolls his phone in his hands for the most part, letting the edges pinch against his fingers while he deliberates. Takamaki had offered him help, more than enough for him to get a general idea of what he should say, but each draft he managed to write felt wrong. The fear of the boy, or Madarame, contacting the police makes him erase each message he's written.

He's about to send one, though. Over lunch Takamaki had approached him again with another suggestion. She'd all but typed it out for him but didn't have the chance to send it before lunch had ended.

"Please let me model for you." Akira reads it over; there's nothing wrong with it, yet, like all the others, his hands are resisting sending it off. He's about to wipe the screen clean of his teammate's words but his arm is tugged on forcefully, making him stumble and turn around from where he's standing, leaving his back to the stairwell he'd just came from. Morgana lurches forward as he does, but with a yelp while Akira sucks down a gasp of shock.

He's about to apologize when, "Stay away from Takamaki!" A girl's voice shrieks into his face. Her shadow blurs from where his eyes are planted onto the floor, though Akira has no idea what's she's doing before his head scalp and neck tingle with a sudden sensation. It's quickly followed by the sound of splashing; a liquid, like water but green and pungent, rains down over him, slipping down his hunched shoulders and through his uniform.

Morgana makes another noise.

More of the liquid spills over his head, skimming down his face and over his closed eyes. It splashes onto the floor and pools uncomfortably in his socks and shoes.

The sound of the container hitting the ground- presumably- goes off like a bang, and makes him jump in place, nearly making him slip. The laughter that follows is a roar that makes him jump a second time, that does make him trip, stumbling backwards and landing painfully against the steps to the third floor. His back and underside flare up painfully, an uncomfortable contrast to how cold his head and toes are; yet both feel opposite to how his hands are both sticky and warm. His stomach clenches painfully and a spike of nausea shoots up his throat but doesn't fully show itself. It's a small mercy, he thinks.

"What's going on- oh goodness." Another female voice calls out; it sounds familiar, but Akira has yet to open his eyes. Another hand grabs onto his arm and Akira wonders if another punishment is about to follow.

Stay away from Takamaki. Echoes through him. Had he done something wrong? Surely he must have.

Guilt and shame wash flood through his system, leaving him too tired to pull against the hands tugging him to his feet. The person pulls him forward, making him sway and stumble in order to catch up to them. Morgana cries out as his weight swings forward, then settles under his arm,
almost enough to send him tripping forward again.

Akira wipes at his face with the sleeve of his school blazer. It does little to clear the stickiness away, but he is able to flick his eyes open and catch the faces of his classmates and other students as he's lead through the hallways.

They wanted to advertise his shame. Akira drops his chin, letting it collide with his sinking chest. Liquid flicks off of his hair when he does, splashing noisily against the floor, a noise that's nearly drowned out by the static-like whispers going on around him. Shivering and weak, Akira lets himself be guided across the school, unable to resist even with Arsene crashing against the container of his mind, darting from one end to the other and crashing against them, begging him to act, to rebel; to fight. He can't manage to do any of those things, and tries to offer apologies to the other in an attempt to placate him.

This is who he was.

A force pushes him down. Akira expects to land on the floor, but is met with resistance from a cushioned chair instead. He wonders if he's about to be expelled or at least punished in some manner. Nobody speaks to yell at him and he flinches when something wet and soft wipes over his cheek.

"Sit still." The voice from earlier says from directly in front of him. His glasses are taken from him, unsticking from his ears and nose with tearing noise. The hair that usually curtains his face slaps wetly against his scalp as it's pushed back and the exposed skin is wiped across as well, removing the tacky dampness from his forehead and eyebrows. No words are offered as the woman wipes over his closed eyes and down under his chin.

"It's okay, Kurusu-kun, you can open your eyes now." Akira does and jerks back a little when he sees his English teacher leaning in front of him. Chouno-sensei frowns at him and Akira jerks his gaze towards the floor between his still-wet shoes.

"It's okay." Chouno-sensei says again. Akira's not sure if he's meant to believe it more now that she's repeated herself, but he finds himself more unsure than when she'd dragged him off. "Girls these days are so aggressive, hm? When I was your age- which wasn't that long ago, mind you- the worst that would happen is someone biting off your erasers. All of them if you really hated them. Eventually, there wasn't a single eraser in our class, can you believe that?"

Laughing, she didn't wait for a response before she threw another question. "And you know what I learned from all of that?"

Numb, Akira finds himself shaking his head.

"Well," She starts lightly, "At first, it taught me not to make any mistakes. Always double-checking myself before I wrote anything down. Then, the girl who sat next to me started crying. Everyday this happened. Hayes-sensei started class, and she started crying, just like that!" Chouno-sensei finished with a snap of her fingers. "It was a few days before I finally got an answer from her. She said, 'I can never keep up with you!' I'm not sure why this made her cry, or why she felt the need to do what I was doing, but instead, I grabbed her pencil and scratched out the mistakes on her page and told her to start again. It wasn't until I did the same thing on my own paper that she finally got the message. That was the second thing I learned, you can always start over if you don't do it right."

Her hands land on his shoulders as she moves to stand squarely in front of him, she either didn't notice how soaked he was or didn't care. "Do you get what I'm trying to say?"
Akira didn't, but he nods anyways and feels guilty for it right after, slightly less so when the foreign touch is lifted.

"Hm. I'll see about getting you a replacement uniform. I doubt that smell is going to fade anytime soon, though." Akira nods again, watches as her legs step away from him, clicking with each step as she crosses the room. He hears the sounds of cupboards swinging open, but doesn't look up, not even when Chouno-sensei starts talking again. "Normally, I'd send you home, but you have my class right after this next one, so it's probably best that you stay. Not to mention that Kobayakawa would have a cow- not a literal one, mind you- if I let you out early."

A door slams shut, followed quickly by another one creaking open. Akira toes at a patch of liquid starting to blossom under his shoe guiltily.

She starts talking again, this time with a deep, gruff voice- mostly reminiscent of Principal Kobayakowa's. "You let that delinquent onto the streets, Cho-chan? How could you do something so dastardly, so monstrous, so heinously criminal!" She cackles highly, like a screech, then continues in her normal voice. "I'm not the best person around- not that Kawa-chan could be convinced of any less, mind- but I know a good kid when I see one. You'd probably head straight home and start studying, tuck your grandmother into bed, cook dinner for your two and a half siblings, then come back the next day not covered in green tea."

What is she saying? Akira's left confused by her words. He didn't have a grandmother, as far as he knew, nor siblings of any kind. He'd never cooked a meal for anyone, either.

Another door slams shut, "At least that's the way I see it." Another one opens. Chouno-sensei makes a small, exclamatory noise.

"It's a winter uniform, so it's probably going to be a bit stuffy, but it's probably better than sticking out in your gym clothes, right?" Akira catches her walking past him and hears her set something onto the desk beside him, the clothes she'd just mentioned presumably, and stares at her feet in utter confusion. Chouno-sensei hadn't been cruel to him since he'd transferred, in fact, Akira would probably consider her the kindest of all the teachers he's interacted with since transferring. Despite that, she'd never been kind either, not enough for him- or Arsene- to find the interaction unusual and unwarranted; not cruel did not mean nice. Sure, she never yelled at him when he had to take his time responding to her questions and she never glared at him with suspicion. She hadn't treated him like a criminal when everyone around them did and Akira isn't sure how he's meant to respond to that.

Would she get in trouble for associating herself with him? The thought plagued him as soon as it had sprung up, sticking down heavy in his gut. Nothing good came from helping the criminal, after all. Takamaki seems to have gotten that as well. He wondered when Sakamoto would learn it as well.

Soon. The dark shadow looming over him promises. Akira shivers.

He doesn't get to find an answer before she's talking to him again, "You should probably hurry, I do have a class to get back to you know- not that they'd mind the free time, mind you."

Guilt stabs through him when she says this and he launches himself to his seat, nearly knocking into her as he bows deeply. Swiftly as he can, he takes the clothes she'd just put down and finds the exit, lugging Morgana, who'd remained surprisingly silent through the whole exchange, along with him. Akira takes both of them across the hall, he's still on the second floor and walking past a door he's never noticed before. The halls are devoid of the other students but he can hear their whispers seeping from the thin doorways lining the halls, but their voices are cut short when he firmly shuts
the door to the restroom and, after a moment of leaning against it, flicks the heavy lock closed.

Shujin's bathroom is almost identical to his old school's, including the smell, but replaced with expensive and clean looking materials. Akira ignores a sudden swell in the constant current that tells him he doesn't belong in a place like this and locks himself in the nearest stall. Carefully, he sets Morgana on the floor, facing away from him, and immediately starts unbuttoning the school blazer. It takes almost more strength than he has at the moment to rip off the tacky material the sleeves had turned into and leaves his arms looking red when it's finally off. The shirt underneath is equally as soaked as his blazer and makes a loud, disgusting noise when he drops it onto the floor next to his blazer. Morgana makes a sharp, startled noise and pushes himself out of the half-opened zipper before Akira can cover himself.

"What was that?" Morgana questions alertly, then jerks his head in his direction. The motion allows Akira to watch as Morgana's eyes bulge even wider than they usually are, the ocean-colored irises are made into full rings before him, almost the same size as his MetaVerse counter-part's.

Akira isn't allowed to absorb the observation as much as he normally might. Instead, a bone-deep, even further down the chill from having tea dumped on him, iciness clutches at him. All the embarrassment that had soaked into his cheeks suddenly sinks down into his gut, leaving him exposed, even with his glasses. Shame so black grabs onto his wrists, making his hands unable to move, and crushes his knees. They keep him standing, frozen, when he wants to fall down. With Morgana's eyes as wide as they are, Akira is able to track his teammate's eyes as they swipe across frame; taking in his sunken stomach, the prominent claw-like shape of his ribs, and the scars that coil sharply across both of those things. Not quite reliving the moments that had lead up to this one, Akira finds himself feeling as vulnerable as if he were.

Morgana doesn't say anything at first. He finds himself grateful for that. It gives him time to recover, to finally find a grasp on the control that had slipped out of his hands. He should have been more careful! He could have left Morgana at home once again, could have left him outside the stall or outside the bathroom even. In the daze brought on by the kindness of a stranger, he'd lost hold of the things he was meant to hold close.

Morgana knows! Reels across his mind, bouncing around and smashing against the very borders of his being like Arsene had done moments ago. His persona remained silent, but cognizant, awake, in his turmoil; a solid pillar in the landscape of his mind; the others didn't even stir, nonplussed by his distress.

"Who did this to you, Joker?" His teammate finally hisses, eyes finally narrowing with realization. The cat pulls himself firmly out of the bag, flopping it over as he takes an aggressive posture just in front of the stall's door. It reminds Akira, of all things, of Morgana's desperate cries in Mementos, the first time he'd realized the great harm that the other was capable of.

Akira shakes his head. Hoping that it wouldn't be a feeble attempt, that Morgana would just let this go like how he and the others had accepted Morgana's mysterious past.

"Tell me!" Morgana shouts, growling. It vibrates off the stall's walls, off the walls beyond it and into him. It shatters the force holding him down and Akira folds his arms over his chest, concealing himself with trembling fingers. The sudden explosion leaves his teammate panting, bobbing up and down, breathless and nearly feral looking; Akira can't look away, though, stuck in the gaze of a predator.

All at once, Morgana looks away from him, but the unshakable weight of his domineering presence refuses to lift. Akira watches numbly as the cat digs into the bag he'd just turned over and pulls his head out just as quickly.
His cell phone slides against the expensive looking tiles and against his shoe. Looking down at it, Akira spots two dark holes where Morgana's teeth must have punctured through it.

"Tell me, Akira!" Morgana shouts again.

Arsene expands outwards, just enough to gather his attention and finally speaks, "Nothing trumps an protective parent, little thief, feline as he may be."

Akira could think of a few ways out of the exchange, when he was finally given a moment of reprieve. None of them ended without repercussions, his earlier fear only stacks on top of that, and Akira finds himself finally toppling over. His knees crumble, letting him fall onto them. He had done this before! Told someone his worst secret, how much of a waste he was as a person, and it had turned out badly; Takemi had resented him! He had no idea what Morgana would do given the information of his past, it wasn't like he could talk to many people about it, but Morgana could easily draw Sakura-san's attention or anybody else's. The cat could easily as expose him as any human, Akira was certain of that much.

His chest was left cold when his arms finally unclenched from his sides, but his phone felt even colder when it slipped into the palm of his hand. He wasn't sure what to say. It didn't seem like Morgana would be assuaged or placated like the other people around him. Arsene had urged him to tell the truth, but Akira felt himself resisting for some reason; could he really turn against the people that had kept him alive and clothed for all of his life, even if it was to a cat? Would Morgana understand if he said he deserved it? Takemi had seemed to think so, she'd been disgusted with him, with his condition, each time they'd met and finally snapped at him like Morgana was doing now.

Morgana looked ready to shout again by the time Akira had typed out an answer. His mouth was hanging open, panting slowly with rise and fall of his chest and his ears were folded backwards.

It was too early for this, but also too late; Akira was exhausted. It took all he had to keep himself upright, even then things seemed to sway in front of him. Morgana's laser-like focus seemed to blur, deep blue flickered like flames in front of him. He's not sure how something so blue can blaze like an inferno.

"My parents." He finally admits. The message only keeps his teammate's attention for a few moments before that soul-piercing blue was trained on him once more.

"Your parents?" Morgana hissed in a sharp whisper, like the secret it was.

Akira nods weakly. His throat, useless as it is, constricts painfully and he shivers against the bathroom's frigid air, his exposed chest shudders and scars that are almost as old as he is start to burn.

"That's torture! That's disgusting!" Morgana starts, stamping one paw on the ground with each degrading adjective. Slowly, Akira feels them starting to stack up inside of him, until-

Twisting around on his knees, Akira swipes the clean uniform off of the toilet seat and lifts it open just enough for him to stick his head inside. The lid claps against the side of his head as he starts retching into the bowl; his own anguish echoes up from the water. He's not sure where the mess comes from, can't even remember the last thing he'd ate, yet the burn of acid rocketing out of his throat distracts him from the fact that he's still very much exposed, though he can still faintly hear Morgana's voice calling out to him from just over his shoulder.

Not bothering to flush the mess, he wipes his face on his disregarded blazer- he has to wash it
anyway- and, without turning around, pulls on the button-up shirt that Chouno-sensei had given him. It's crisp and starchy, like his uniform had been when he'd first gotten it, and feels very uncomfortable given how sticky his skin still is under the material, but it would do until he could get to Yongen.

Akira drops his pants as well, knowing that he didn't have much to lose at this point. It felt that his shame had been stripped from him along with his secrets; his very core had been exposed to someone he lived with but barely knew and he was still numb recovering. A flush of heat and color flourished upwards from his neck regardless as he avoided his teammate's gaze. He hoped it was a good sign.

Morgana continues to look up at him, ranting, despite his various stages of undress. "-Despicable! No good!-" Akira glances towards him while adjusting his belt- the pants were incredibly loose on him without it, sticky as it was- and notices, as well as remembers, that Morgana had gotten hit by the assault earlier as well. Patches of the cat's black fur had clumped together across his back and up his neck, something he hadn't noticed until Morgana's gaze no longer ensnared him.

Pulling on a new pair of socks, but stepping into his still moist shoes, Akira cringes at the noise it makes, but scoops down, ignoring the stiffness of his back and arms, and plucks his teammate into his arms. Morgana's aggressive speech cuts off with a shocked yelp and claws he can't feel sink through his borrowed clothes. He unlocks the stall and carries the other to the row of sinks lining the opposite wall.

Wetting his hands under a torrent of warm water, he runs his still dripping fingers over the backside of the cat's fur, moving with the grain of his fur and smoothing down patches that the tea had left sticking up. The other remains quiet while he does this, something Akira finds himself grateful for; his head is still filled with static, even with Arsene acting as a central force for him to wrap around and collect himself with, a part of him that's remaining solid while everything else slips through his grasp, the consistency and support only leaves him more frazzled and confused though. Arsene rarely felt so solid outside of the MetaVerse. He feels lost, empty, but so unbelievably full; he's not sure how to explain it, nor how to make it go away.

The water wicks away the sticky spots on his teammate's back quickly, leaving them with no reason to remain quiet, but also no reason to remain where they are either. Yet he can see Morgana's hesitancy to close this door behind them, to make it real. He's not sure how he can tell what the other is feeling, it had seemed like all but a foreign concept- save for the exception in Arsene, who lived inside of him- until now.

Akira runs a hand down Morgana's neck, over his damp and sleek spine with no purpose other than to touch him. He was certain that it wasn't a comforting touch, he was probably applying too much pressure- or maybe not enough- for the other to garner any affection from it. Part of him felt obligated to do so, though, to comfort him when he looked so destroyed.

I destroyed him. He thinks honestly, taking in the wide-blown look that Morgana's eyes had taken, the slack jaw that no words filtered out of; Morgana was speechless after his initial outrage, left empty like he was. He rubs the cat dry with paper towels, trying his best to be gentle but he's never had a pet before and isn't sure how much pressure is too much or not enough. The other doesn't say anything in protest, however, so Akira figures it wouldn't matter for now; he washes his hands of tea and fur, making sure to rinse Morgana's presence down the drain entirely, and offers his school bag to his teammate after a quick check of its contents. Morgana, who sat on top of his things, seemed to have taken most of the damage and left his school supplies dry but squished.

The cat doesn't accept the bag, doesn't seem to acknowledge anything other than Akira, staring at
him with void-like eyes, unblinking and he has to physically maneuver the other inside of it. He does his best to ensure nothing snags on the zipper and that he's entirely concealed before taking in a huge breath. He knows he's not alone, not entirely, if he stilled his breathing, he could feel Morgana's presence expanding against him calmly and rhythmically, but without falling into the other's trap-like gaze, Akira felt himself a little less tense. Some of the sensations that made life real- though he couldn't name any of them- seemed to sink back into him, like cognizance was returning to him. Along with it came worries about everything else, some not including Morgana- and the cat's new found knowledge- in the slightest.

His thoughts drifted to Takamaki, to the stickiness on his neck and back, the way his feet squelched noisily whenever he adjusted them. She remained silent in front of him through Chouno-sensei's class, not bothering to look back at him. Did she truly despise him that much? Had the pressure of Kitagawa and Madarame have that much of an effect on her that she'd not even say anything to him about it. He really was a nuisance, something to be scourged, an omen; maybe he was the ruin that he was meant to prevent, maybe that's why Igor urged him into the dangerous unknown, to be killed.

That made the power of persona make even less sense, however.

Akira thought about Sakamoto as well. The blond had claimed they were friends, but the other boy was friends with Takamaki long before he'd even met Akira, would he take her side in this? Akira knows he would, but part of him still forces the question.

Alone... He realizes. Akira would have to face Kitagawa, and Madarame, and the Ruin alone.

Morgana would leave him as well, now that he knows- now that he's seen- that thought, in particular, sent shivers up his spine.

Arsene reaches out to him again, a massive pillar of crimson and fire and blood in his mind, grasping at him with chains in his mindscape to hold down the rampant thoughts that were making him up at the moment.

School ended and he'd retains nothing from it, his notebooks remaining entirely blank. Akira feels his mind start to mimic them as well. He wants to go home. Packing his things, he was one of the first people out of the room and off the campus. He maneuvers his aching legs and noisy, wet shoes to the station until he's standing in front of LeBlanc's closed door with Morgana hanging from his shoulder.

He wonders how much trouble he'd be in with Sakura-san with coming in with wet shoes and considers taking them off, then wonders if barefooted would be worse than not in the situation.

In a moment, Akira decides to keep his shoes on and ignores the disturbing sounds they make as he stalks past his guardian and ascends into the attic.

He's less careful than he knows he should be when he sets his school bag down, Morgana remains quiet though, and slides out of the bag, sliding open the zipper with a soft noise.

Akira takes to the couch and buries his face in his hands, wonders if he should be crying or freaking out; neither happens though, he's not angry either, as much as Arsene prods him towards that direction. There's no desire in him for revenge or justice. He knows, however, that he needs to prepare for the worst. Kitagawa needed him; the ruin needed him.

He's not even sure what type of message he types up and sends to the artist, but an affirmative is almost immediate. Arsene stirs at that as well, as if aware of the resolve that Akira's managed to
craft together from the rubble. The other is pleased, but wordless, a warmth ripples out like a wave, red and blue, across his mind and it makes him shudder, the hair on his arms and neck stand on edge in response.

Akira doesn't offer an explanation for suddenly jumping to his feet and carrying himself back into LeBlanc without Morgana. He thinks the distance between them would be beneficial if nothing else, even if that cat gets mad at him later for leaving without response. He scuttles past Sakura-san, keeping his head down while he does so and offers his bathhouse card at the window across the street with his chin still tucked against his sticky chest.

It's early afternoon and the place is empty, which surprises him a bit and relieves him twice as much as he starts undressing, making a messy pile of the borrowed uniform before wrapping himself in towels, his scars showing to nobody but himself.

Under hot water, he starts scrubbing the stickiness off of his skin, leaving it red but smooth. The green tea washes down the drain, replaced by- perhaps ironically- a new coating of green tea, though much more subtle than whatever had been dumped onto his head.

He thought while he scrubbed, even when he really wanted to disconnect from everything and reside in this moment of solitude.

_I made contact with Kitagawa-san..._ Behind his calves, slumping over on the shower stool to reach, careful of the scabbed over scratches from when he'd chased after Morgana. _Next is to get the door open with Kitagawa-san not noticing but making sure Madarame does._ Over his knees and thighs, then around them; he'd need to learn how to pick a lock. _Then enter the MetaVerse and continue looking for the treasure._ Up his stomach then curling around his ribs, following the curves of old scars.

It wasn't a very good plan. There were many, many things that could- and probably would- go wrong, things Akira probably wasn't even aware of and wouldn't be until it was too late; things he couldn't plan for, things he couldn't work around because he couldn't talk, fight, or run his way out of them, not without violating his probation anyway.

Akira wipes his face roughly with the flannel and chances a look at the door at the other end of the shower stalls. Just looking at the entrance to the baths made his heart race with bad memories; as much as he wanted to sink his problems away under hot water- a luxury he wasn't afforded at home but had since started to crave when bathing became something he could do whenever he liked- but he didn't want to risk anyone coming in and seeing him- seeing his back- and freaking out again.

Once a day was more than enough.

After drying off, barely an hour had passed when he steps back into LeBlanc, his hair was still damp, curling around the frames of his glasses and dripping, but he knew that he couldn't waste an afternoon away making sure he was completely dry, though he was tempted.

The thought of returning to Morgana made him hesitate. Akira wasn't sure if he could handle any more developments; Takamaki's rejection, Chouno-sensei's odd speech, Arsene's overwhelming presence while Morgana found out, all of that was too much for a single day or even a lifetime. Akira stands at the bottom of the steps, thinking; he doesn't know what to do.

Morgana calls out to him as soon as he steps into the attic, "Joker!" He watches the cat approach, leaping from the bed and scrambling in front of him, blocking him from advancing further.

"We should talk..." He says, blue eyes burning. Akira glances towards the bed and moves to step
around the other.

This is it. Akira realizes. Morgana was planning to leave as well, though Akira wonders why he hadn't done so while he'd been away.

Morgana lets him pass and follows quickly behind him. Akira catches him leaping onto the bed while he digs through his bag, pulling out his damaged cell phone before dropping the still damp bag onto the floor. Crawling onto the bed—though he'd much rather crawl under it—Akira pulls himself against the wall with the pillow against his back and the comforter over his chest, he shrinks himself down and resists the urge to draw his knees up. Like this, Morgana is closer in eye level to him. Coincidentally, it also makes avoiding the cat's gaze easier when he stares down at his lap; it's a comfortable position.

"You can't give up." Morgana starts, his voice is calm and even; everything that Akira hadn't been expecting comes out. It feels like a wind passes through his body. "Even without Panther, you still owe me—you promised, remember?"

Morgana's stare is physical, unrelenting, and he's vulnerable under it.

Akira grasps at his still damp hair, rolling waves of the strands between his fingers. He bobs his head, his chin cutting into his chest when he does. He wants to say no, but he did promise, so he'd follow Morgana's lead; making him wonder why the other wasn't leading their group in the first place.

Takamaki wouldn't have done that to him. He realizes. Guilt seizes his heart. She might not have liked him, but if someone else had been leading them, maybe she'd stick around.

"We can replace her, find another persona user, it'll be okay." Morgana assures, Akira's not sure how he does it, keeps believing in this thing. Morgana sighs, "But I need you. I need Joker, but I need you, too. Here in the real world, until I find my memories, I need you with me. I'm... in cat's body, I can't get information or weapons, or keep our team together, while I'm like this, Joker, that's why I need your help."

Akira swallows around thick air, his neck hurts when he does, most likely from the angle, and his nose burns.

"I wish I could do it on my own, but I can't." Morgana admits firmly, the bed dips around his legs when the cat takes a step forward. "You promised me that you'd help me, Joker, so you owe me this much."

"You owe me." He repeats, then sniffs sharply. "So you're gonna get us into that shack. I can get beyond that door, but you're gonna have to be there to activate the MetaNav so we can get into the palace when Madarame shows up."

Akira nods again, submitting to his promise. Part of him, whatever is left of his rationality, recognizes that taking orders from a cat—like he was doing right at that very moment—wouldn't be received well by anyone else.

"Once we do that, we should be able to find the treasure, the palace didn't look that big so it shouldn't take much longer to find it. Then we just need to send the calling card..." Morgana swallows, he's close enough that Akira can hear it. "Do you think Ryuji is staying?"

Shaking his head, Akira feels guilty about the huff that his teammate lets out.

"We'll have to make them ourselves then." His teammate advises, finally sinking into a seated
position against his leg. Akira feels himself grow a little less tense in response.

"I think Monday would be the best time to keep Madarame off guard." Morgana suggests. It was Friday today, which would mean he only had two days to prepare. "People are usually less on guard during Mondays."

Akira nods, more to himself than to Morgana. Monday it is.

Things settle down after Morgana says that. The cat turns quiet, resting his head on his paws which are resting on Akira's thigh. His eyes are closed but Akira is certain the other is still awake, planning in ways that Akira couldn't. Not to say that he doesn't try. He takes what Morgana had said into his thought process as best he can. Things the other had said weren't very logical- at least in a way that Akira could understand; it's not like the MetaVerse itself was very logical- and seemed to clash with each doubt and uncertainty he had about dealing with Kitagawa-san and Madarame, yet the cat seemed to know more about this than he did. The cat knew- seemingly- how to get through someone's guards and defenses, understood people in a way that Akira couldn't quite grasp- he enjoyed Takamaki's company and seemed off-put by Iwai while Akira was almost the opposite. Yet his teammate wasn't human and wasn't able to apply his knowledge.

*Like me.* He thinks, not because he's smart like Morgana, but Akira was trapped behind a useless mouth, just like Morgana was trapped behind a body that wasn't his own.

Akira is unsure how Morgana plans on getting behind the door in the shack, even his MetaVerse body seemed to have trouble with working with tools, yet he had a belief in his teammate to accomplish it and he's not sure why.

He's not sure of a lot of things.

Like Chouno-sensei had suggested earlier, Akira eventually picks his schoolbag back up and starts going through most his notes and schoolwork. He knows that translating English or finding the ratio between two shapes wouldn't help him with the upcoming issue, but it's what he knows how to do and it's what he feels comfortable doing.

Morgana doesn't say anything when he gets out of bed to get ready for sleep. Akira is certain the other doesn't even glance in his direction when he pulls off his shirt. Akira clutches at it, instincts making his body stiffen. The first time had been an accident, a lapse in his judgement, this he does intentionally. He lets the shirt drop onto the dusty floorboards beneath his feet and glances over in his teammate's direction, he's not sure what he's expecting. Judgement for sure, more cursing, a comment about how damaged he is.

None of those things are said out loud.

Tugging on a different shirt, Akira heads to the bathroom, readying himself for sleep while he ponders Morgana.

People look at him different when he walks into school the next morning. The fact that people are looking at him at all is strange in itself, he realizes, since Kamoshida, the other students didn't look at him directly and whispers about him were starting to die down, which he would prefer to what was unfolding in front of him.

A flash of heat pools out from his nose and into his cheeks. *Everyone* was staring at him. Ducking his head, Akira does his best to navigate towards his class without bumping into anyone and drawing even more attention.
Akira knows what they're whispering about, even if he doesn't catch any of the words whispered-and sometimes not- around him. He does his best to ignore it, like he'd been suggested when he'd first transferred, keeping his head down and focused on his studies. The constant stream seems to die down when class actually starts though, but picks up just as quickly during the pauses between them.

"I need to talk to you." Someone says, suddenly breaking through the wall of focus and monotony he'd scraped together.

Akira is standing over his desk, tucking things into his bag and around Morgana.

An arm grabs onto his.

This is not part of the plan! is his first reaction upon being lead out of the classroom and down the hall- the opposite of what Chouno-sensei had done for him the day prior. He looks down at his bag, towards Morgana, for guidance, but finds nothing but wide blue eyes, dark as the ocean.

They were supposed to work out making contact with Kitagawa-san, making sure he'd be free on Monday afternoon for their plan. Instead, he was being pulled by his arm past the school gates and down the street. Blonde hair bounces in front of him, knocking into the pale arm that's latched onto his, and nearly distracts him from being pulled past the alleyway that he and Sakamoto had stumbled through when they'd first discovered the MetaVerse.

Takamaki. Akira recognizes, still reeling. He hadn't expected this at all. As her message had been clear, he'd expected her to just ignore him for the rest of the year, to stay away from him and her, but...

This was not part of the plan!

Without another word, she leads him through the alley, around the corner- turning right- then down another path, one mingled with a crowd loud enough to make him want to cover his ears. Takamaki leads him forward, seemingly unbothered, and ushers him through a door.

The cafe opens up in front of him like a dark horizon, dark wood makes up most of the space- the floor, running bar, tables, and chairs are all made of the same stuff- and reminds him faintly of LeBlanc.

Takamaki pushes him into the booth in the corner, far from the entrance, the wall beside them is made entirely of glass- something LeBlanc doesn't have- and casts a bright beam of light onto the table between them, and onto Takamaki's fair hair when she slides in across from him. The booth seat is soft and worn, but not the same dark brown as almost everything else. It feels out of place, a piece for a different puzzle; it's uncomfortable to sit on the more aware he becomes of how it doesn't match.

"You were right, Akira-kun." Takamaki sniffs suddenly, drawing his spiraling attention away from the unmatching interior of a place he's never been to. "I should have listened to you, we both should have."

I was right? Mind racing, he tries to scope out everything he'd said to her that could have been either right or wrong.

Nothing comes up.

"Ryuji almost got pushed down the stairs at lunch today." She continues plainly and without explaining herself or this place, leaving him only more confused. "All because of me."
Takamaki sighs deeply and inhales sharply. Akira knows that she's close to tears, something had tipped him off, an inkling or impression. The way she breathed was not normal, too loud to be anything but and Arsene agreed with him, but nudged him to take action, sending a surge of something down into his veins, through his hands which had taken a tight grip onto his knees.

"We should have stayed away!" The girl across from him cries out, startling him despite his prescience. Akira catches through the fringe of his hair as Takamaki folds forward, curling her arms to cradle her head. Her shoulders bob between weeps, expanding widely when she breaths in.

Not part of the plan. His mind echoes over Arsene criticizing him. "Comfort her, you imbecile!"

Comfort... That would explain the trembling in his hands, Arsene had been urging him to act; to comfort. He was still clueless, and nothing sparked recognition inside of him as he released the grip he had on his pants and lifted a hand into the air, hovering over Takamaki's shaking form. His fingers trembled over her long, blonde hair and knew it would be too soft.

Carefully, Akira reaches across the abyss of the dark-wooded table and rests his hand on Takamaki's quivering shoulder. She still has her school uniform on, so the texture under his fingers is familiar enough despite the convulsing it seems to do under his already shaking hands.

Arsene sighs across the entirety of his mind, breath of his other self reaches from corner to corner. Akira feels his face grow hot, knowing he's being judged by the other, and feels- justly- upset when his other half doesn't offer any advice on what he should be doing.

Takamaki cries for several minutes. Akira feels his bearings starting to fray as it continues; he has no idea what to do! Did she bring him here just to make him more uncomfortable? Was it all part of a bigger plot to get him scolded again?

Finally, without provocation, Takamaki's form goes incredibly still. He sees it sooner than he feels it, hand and fingers numb from her trembling combined with his. With that, he retracts his arm and cradles the numb appendage with his other hand, keeping them in his lap. In the minutes, he's not sure how many Takamaki had spent crying or how long they'd been here, he'd had a hard time absorbing anything she'd said, but it all came rushing forwards once the girl across from him calmed down.

Ryuji got hurt? He questions. He was confused, another heavy block dropped into the sinking feeling his stomach had conjured up the moment Takamaki had grabbed onto him.

Arsene, nudging his consciousness against Akira's own, tried to guide him towards an answer he could understand, but was futile. His mind continues to race with unanswered questions, none of them relating to what he should be doing right this moment.

Gazing down at his bag in the seat right next to him, Akira knows that Morgana is listening- though probably isn't as confused about the situation as he is- he wonders what the other would suggest to him.

"What?" Akira ends up saying, sliding his phone across the table with one hand because his arm refuses strength.

Takamaki tucks her head downwards, reading his message over. "Today at lunch-" She shakes her head, sending waves of blonde hair spinning around her face. "Remember when I told you about Hayawaka-san?"

Hayawaka-san? He has no clue.
She continues regardless, not waiting for a response from him. "She's the girl you kicked out of the top ten during mid-terms, the one who wanted to get you expelled, remember?" Akira feels his spine jerk at that, an instinctual panic. "B-before that she used to just say stuff about me, but that was when K-Kamoshida was still... here. Hayawaka-san apologized to me after Kamoshida confessed, saying she never meant any of it. She um, wanted to be friends with me, along with another group of girls." Takamaki exhales deeply and slides her elbows back onto the table. One of her fingers runs a pattern across the dark-wooded table between them. "I really wanted them to like me. I'm not sure why. N-no, that's not entirely true either."

Her finger stops. "I guess I was lonely. I have you and Ryuji." Morgana huffs quietly from beside him, Takamaki doesn't seem to hear it. "But we just talk about er, you know what, most of the time. And before that, I only had Shiho. So I guess I just wanted some friends, to see what it was like. But I swear, I never knew they were going to do that to you and Ryuji! I never would have forgiven them if I knew this would happen!"

Akira leans back in his seat a little, surprised, both at her admission and her volume.

"Women." Arsene huffs, "Most vicious creatures you'll find."

Akira knew that wasn't true, yet at the same time, the other's words held some truth to them. Women- and people in general- weren't dangerous in the same way shadows were, at least not most of the time. People didn't attack in the way shadows did, they were confusing and left him lost; yesterday had been a prime example of that, even know a person was leaving him confused in a way a shadow couldn't, as far as he knew any way.

"I want to say sorry, Akira-kun. You're the leader, and you told us to keep separate, but I was just... desperate, I guess. And you got hurt because of it." She sits up, quickly and sharply, "Even if you're mad at me though, I'm not giving up, not until we save Kitagawa-kun at least!"

"Mad?" He repeats, rolling it over. Akira hadn't been mad at all. Confused and scared, mad at himself for not being careful, but not mad at Takamaki.

She had nothing to do with it. Akira realizes and sits up in his seat as well. Beyond that, he isn't sure what to think. He feels overloaded with information, none of it relevant to his mission.

It's relieving, though, knowing that he hadn't done something wrong- aside from not being leader-like, something Morgana had already scolded him on. Akira was the one to cause everything though. If he hadn't intervened back then, if he hadn't walked with Sakamoto or continued to enter the MetaVerse, this would have been prevented in its entirety. He was to blame, yet Takamaki was the one crying over it. Ryuji had almost been injured because of him.

Akira was at fault for everything. Might he actually be the ruin that Igor had spoke of?

"I know I probably don't deserve it, but I want to keep going with you, Ryuji, and Morgana. I-if after we help Kitagawa and you're still mad, you can kick me out and never talk to me again- you don't even have to look at me while we're in the palace- but- I mean, if you can't forgive me, can you at least do it Kitagawa s-so, he doesn't end up..."

Dead. Akira finishes. No food and living in that shack, he was able to recall the smell without thinking about it and his stomach churned painfully in response. When he thought about it, it reminded him of Kamoshida's palace, in the same way that the cafe they were in reminded him of LeBlanc.

"I'm not mad and you can stay as long as you want." Akira offers eventually, once he's able to
function enough to remember what a conversation was.

It wasn't the most leader-like thing he could have said, but it was something that he meant. Takamaki had helped him a lot inside of the MetaVerse and while Morgana insisted that he could find other persona users, he knew that the link between them- it stemmed from her heart to his, thin as a shoelace and bright white, the same he'd noticed with Ryuji and, just now, Morgana- would be difficult to replace, even if the right thing to do would be to send her and Sakamoto away, Akira found himself unwilling to say that to his teammates, even if he couldn't look them in the eye or share their experiences.

Regardless, they'd have to come up with a new plan. Takamaki's presence might alter the way Morgana handled his part or something; he wasn't sure what part she could do.

Suddenly he was being grappled. Arms around his neck and yellow hair splashing across his face- it was impossibly soft like he'd predicted- making him shudder. Cringing, he tried to jerk away on reflex, he was surprised to meet an unyielding force; nobody had touched him so closely before, even Takemi, who'd seen everything he had to offer- the recollection was enough to ignite a fierce heat in his cheeks- hadn't been so close!

"Thank you." Takamaki whispers directly into his ear. Akira shivers. She finally pulls away and Akira watches her warily, unsure of what had just happened, he catches her smiling before his gaze diverts itself to the tabletop in front of him. "Aw, you're blushing!" She points out inexplicably. It only adds to his embarrassment, piles onto this feeling- this knowledge- of not belonging.

Did he do something wrong? It was a given, almost, that he had. Akira just wasn't sure what.

"A-anyway." Takamaki says, standing over the table and looming over him still, finally not touching him or asking to be touched by him. "Just tell me what I need to do, I'll clear out my schedule whenever I can so I can help. We still need to get into contact with Kitagawa-kun before the exhibit ends, so we do need to hurry up and get past that door."

Akira doesn't tell her that he's already contacted Kitagawa, that he- and Morgana- already had a plan that she wasn't a part of, he doesn't get the chance before she's collected her things and headed towards the exit to the cafe.

"I'm gonna go see Shiho." She calls out from the doorway, smiling brightly. "Maybe she'll give me some good luck!"

He's not sure how to respond to that, but waves when she does, then again when she passes by the window outside of the booth he's still sitting at. He's also not sure how to respond to the man behind the counter staring at him with sharp black eyes.

Akira leaves the unfamiliar cafe, but the feelings from before come with him, strung up behind him, undetectable. He's confused and unsure, which isn't unusual, he just thought it would lessen after confronting it, however forced that confrontation had been.

Takamaki- and Sakamoto, presumably- would help him and Morgana in getting back into Madarame's shack. Which had been the plan days prior, all except yesterday.

Did problems usually solve themselves so quickly? Hours ago he had been certain that Takamaki had hated him, resented him for reasons he couldn't identify- or maybe his inability to do so was the cause of that hatred- and in less than a full day things were back to normal. He should...

Akira's not sure what he should be, what he's meant to be; a leader for sure, but beyond that he's
completely lost.

Climbing into bed instead of under it, Akira pulls his knees up and under his chin and cradles himself in LeBlanc's darkness. Today had been too much; he recognizes that he's making a habit of saying that, but that logic doesn't stop him from tightening into himself further. Akira breathes in and breathes out slowly, but his body doesn't seem to catch up, pulsing to a rhythm he's unfamiliar with.

Tomorrow- or maybe today, depends on how long he's been trying to sleep- would be Sunday, the day after would be Monday. That- Monday- would be stressful in its own right, but the stress of waiting for it to arrive catches him off guard. There seemed to be so much, yet so little, that he could do to prepare; he could go to Iwai again, pursue Takemi and her medicine, or even sneak into Mementos to train himself. It seemed to far off, distant, but he knew that he'd have to do something of the sort, not to mention contacting Takamaki and Sakamoto.

He dreams about nothing in particular, yet terror slides down his face and back along with sweat. He doesn't feel rested, not enough to do any of things he knew he should. Instead, Akira rolls onto his side and grabs at his phone. The thing he wanted to save for last seems like the easiest thing for him, at least for right now, but when he pulls open the group chat he shares with his teammates, Akira finds it difficult to put into words what he means, just like what had happened with Kitagawa-san.

"Monday." Sends off simply. Akira watches; Takamaki reads it first, then Sakamoto.

"I'll be ready!" The former replies. Akira sighs out.

"What's on Monday?" Sakamoto sends back.

"Getting past that door and finding the treasure!" Takamaki explains in his place. Stickers and pictures follow.

"So soon? Why am I only just hearin about this!" More stickers, this time of angry faces.

"Just get those calling cards ready! We're gonna need them." She orders. Next to him, Morgana begins to stir, nudging against his still damp back with a loud groan.

"You're up early, Joker." Morgana observes from behind him. He shuts the screen off, casting whatever his teammates were saying in darkness.

Am I? Akira questions. A small flood of panic shoots through his veins. It wasn't that early, was it?

"S probably a good thing, though, I was thinking about our plan on Monday. Could you take me into a store today? One where they sell locks. I know I said I could, but I've never really picked a lock in this form before and wanted to make sure I still could. I don't want to jeopardize what we've worked for until now just because I have these stupid... things."

He agrees without considering otherwise. Even if he doesn't know where he would find a place that sells locks, he knows that Morgana has to do this.

"Let me get ready first." Akira says. Leaving his phone on the bed, he grabs onto a new set of clothes from his box; which reminds him that he needs to wash his uniform yet again. It was something he could do while Morgana was practicing later.

Akira washes his face quickly and wipes off the leftover sweat from whatever he'd been dreaming
about with a wet paper towel. Lists upon lists seem to circle around his awareness, things he has to do but can't manage. It's an unusual feeling; new, but real.

Tokyo is still sprawling, still huge and sprawling since the last time he had seen it. His phone, however, makes knowing where he needs to go a simple task- there were more than ten stores that would sell locks or similar materials around Shibuya alone, not counting the ones that were close to either Madarame's shack- but getting there was still as daunting as it always was, even with a instructions. People knocked into him, sending shivers and shocks where they contacted with him. Morgana was bumped a number of times as well, making sharp sounds that made him jump. There was also the matter of the umbrella keeping them dry to worry about; the frame swayed against the heavy winds, knocking into the canopy of other umbrellas around them. Despite the breeze blowing right into his face, Akira was certain that he was being suffocated.

He walks Morgana down the aisles of home security, holding his arm carefully to block the feline from view while he peruses. The cat hadn't seen the lock from himself, but wanted to find a difficult enough one to practice on. Akira looks around as well, though he has no idea what he's looking for, it's his first time in a store like this one.

It smells oddly, the store, but that could be due to the rain crashing down in heavy waves outside that's causing it. It's also huge, with seemingly endless aisles and a ceiling that turns black before it ever ends; he's not sure how something so massive can exist in Tokyo, especially when there are others just like it in the immediate area.

"... Doubt it would be rotational..." Morgana murmurs softly while Akira scans upwards again, reading some of the emboldened titles as he goes.

_Electric lock! Steam lock! HOME Laser set-up! Fast! Easy!_ There's a lot of colors as well, splashes of red and orange behind neat, tiny rows of words that he can't read.

Morgana jerks to the left, nearly slipping out of the bag. "What about that one!" A small paw darts out and sneaks into his vision, pointing in the direction of several large locks, the biggest ones in the place, also the most expensive.

"One of these should keep me busy for a few seconds at least!" The cat exclaims.

Akira nods slowly and steps forward, grabbing onto the closest of the set. The lock sits thick and black behind clear plastic, weighing almost as much as Morgana does, the handle of the lock is thicker than his wrist and the entire mechanism gleams under the overhead lights.

"Let me read the back." Morgana instructs. Akira flips it over and reads along, the specifications aren't something he's knowledgeable about, though, but Morgana seems familiar enough. "Let's get it!"

The cashier behind the counter gives him a strange look when he slides it across the counter. Akira wonders if he might do the same, but is unable to formulate an answer before the man across from him is asking for money. The lock is quite expensive, and takes up a large portion of what they've saved up from Mementos and Madarame's palace; they'd need to acquire more money if Morgana ever wanted to practice on something else. The thought was neither good nor bad, it seemed to simply be, at least for now.

Morgana gets to work as soon as he delivers them back into LeBlanc's attic. Sharp claws create narrow paths down the lock's plastic container, shredding it open with a soft screech.

Akira starts tending to the pile of clothes that he'd left on the floor before they left. His uniform and
the borrowed one go into separate machines than his other clothes at the risk of staining them. The washing powder is pre-mixed and portioned and clouds the stirring water into a milky white before he shuts the lids on the machines. It seems mundane, quiet; quiet, yet frustrating.

He should be helping as well!

Only with what, he knew not. His role in the plan that Morgana had pieced together for them was minimal. He would sit in front of Kitagawa-san, then draw Madarame's attention towards the now open door. At some point, he- and the others- would need to make an escape before the door in Madarame's palace slammed shut once again.

The proceedings were easy to imagine in pieces. However, he had no idea how they'd come together into the plan that Morgana seemed to think would work.

The washer buzzes loudly, making him jump. Akira pulls himself into standing and transfers the dripping loads into the dryers. He watches them spin, a wheel of black, sometimes the white lines on his uniform's trousers would slap against the glass, smearing it for a second; he can't recall having ever doing something like this before either, but he knew what came next: he'd gather his laundry and return to LeBlanc. It was a logical conclusion to make.

So why did he have trouble with this? There had to be a logical end to Morgana's plan.


Wrong order. Akira chastises himself, tugging the now dry laundry against his chest. The bundle was surprisingly warm, hot to the touch even and something he hadn't accounted for.

The sun had faded past the edges of the city as well, making the attic much darker than when he'd left it. Somehow, it adds intensity to the growl he hears when he steps into the attic.

Morgana's lock was still locked.

Akira is hesitant to approach, unsure of how he'd be received, and sets the laundry on the table against the railing instead of the couch like he'd been planning. He's aware of Morgana behind him as he starts folding, hearing the soft curses and mumbling. It feels like something is being poured into his stomach again.

All the while, he occupies himself with laundry. He folds soft, black- and still warm- pairs of socks into bundles that sit in one corner of his box. He folds his pants more carefully, but hangs the ones that go to his uniform, along with the blazer, shirt, and suspenders. The spare uniform remains on the table, folded into a neat pile, which leaves him with little to do.

His school shoes are still damp, the shiny leather of them muddled with what had been dumped onto his head.

_Green tea._ Akira recalls eventually, carrying damp paper towels back into the attic. Morgana's murmurs are slightly louder when he returns. Or that's how they appear to be, at least.

Paper towels from a cafe bathroom probably aren't the recommended Shujin method of cleaning one's shoes, but they get the job done. Dry ones get stuffed inside to soak up the rest of the moisture and, hopefully, the smell.

Suddenly, he's without something to do. Akira finds his hands shaking in response to the realization. He feels without use. There's nothing for him help with. Tomorrow, Morgana would
have to handle the lock in Madarame's shack without his help. Takamaki and Sakamoto would have to perform their parts without his leadership or orders, he would be stuck with both Kitagawa-san and Madarame, but even if he weren't, he had no idea what he might say to them.

The sound of Sakura-san leaving LeBlanc draw his attention for a moment. The man's absence- as well as the customers- should have made the cafe entirely silent, like it had every night before. Yet noise filtered in from every direction.

Akira steps into the bathhouse with a tight grip on the cafe's key. He's not sure about going two days in a row, but a part of him fears it might be the last, that everything that occurs the next day will leave him in the place he fears the most. A sinking feeling accompanies the thought that Sakamoto and Takamaki- and maybe even Morgana- would join him as well, arrested and silenced. They would hate it. He thinks, letting hot water splash down on him. Steam seems to rise off of his skin, leaving bright red trails. It's heavenly, and something he risks losing.

The hot water, as nice as it is, does little to help him escape his thoughts, another noise he can't seem to silence. By the time he realizes this, his skin feels dry, even under the onslaught of water. He dries off and pulls on something to sleep in with numb fingers. His body seems to drag behind where his mind wants to take it, reacting slowly to the directions he sends.

Locking the cafe behind him, Akira climbs back into bed. Morgana had, while he'd been gone, moved onto the desk in the corner of the room and was silently muttering with his face bent over the lock's mechanisms. A number of the tools that he'd made were snapped into pieces and piled onto the floor.

Akira lies in bed longing for something he doesn't know the name of.

Monday flashes into existence with the sound his phone ringing and sun peering over the edges of far off buildings. The attic is cast in a golden glow, illuminating his hand's path towards the shrieking alarm, then just illuminating the room as it falls into silence. Coffee wafts into the attic and makes his stomach clench painfully in on itself, the aroma awakens a panic he'd managed to ignore until this moment. The precipice slips out from under his feet and Akira feels himself falling without moving- maybe the intake of dusty air had caused it- and throws off the blanket and, accidentally, Morgana.

The cat yelps, thumping softly against the wall beside the attic's window, and Akira is apologizing before the other even recovers fully.

His teammate grumbles quietly under his breath, but doesn't acknowledge him, doesn't pin him down with ocean blue eyes that burn like fire.

Akira knows he should be panicking, knows that if his guard is dropped at any moment, his chance of saving himself- preventing the ruin that Igor had prophesied- and the others, Kitagawa-san included, would be turned into dust. None of that seemed to make it to his brain though, which seems to lag behind his body; the opposite of what had happened the night before.

More than anything, he feels tired. An exhaustion that doesn't seem to go away on his walk to school or the panic that thunders in his veins when the train jerks him forward before the doors are even closed.

Akira sits through a school day that doesn't feel like his own, takes notes with hands that feel the same way. His eyes don't shut for more than a moment, despite the burgeoning exhausting twining itself through him. Even Arsene, who has become more talkative and a much bigger presence
inside of his mind, seems unusually sedate.

Takamaki texts their group on when she'll be leaving to avoid being seen with each other. Sakamoto leaves ten minutes after and Akira finally pulls himself from his desk another ten after that. He ends up in front of Madarame's shack with Morgana over his shoulder and his teammates in front of them.

Sakamoto waits across the street, leaning against a wall close to where they'd entered the palace the previous times. The blond shoots them a thumbs up, but has a scowl on his face while he does so.

Akira's not sure what to make of it.

Without him, Takamaki leads the way to the door, pushing past the rusty gate and the stone walls that would soon turn into massive structures. This time, he's more careful about the overgrown plants that adorn the yard, making sure not to get too close to anyone of them. It would be inconsequential, he knows, if his uniform got dirty once again. Today might be the final day he gets to wear it, after all.

Like last time, Takamaki rings the doorbell, but doesn't comment on the unusual sounds coming from inside just before it creaks open. The entire wall seems to shake with the force at which Kitagawa-san seems to reveal himself with.

"You came..." Kitagawa-san gasps and, now that Akira's seen what his teammates had, he can see the signs of starvation lingering in Kitagawa-san's features. For some reason, it's the other boy's hands that catch his attention, long and skeletal fingers. Shadows upon shadows blur each joint of them as he waves them around, enunciating words that Akira should be paying attention to.

"-I thought you were merely playing a joke at my expense when you contacted me, but I'm glad you chose to return!" Kitagawa's head inclines briefly. "Please come in. I'd like to get started immediately."

Takamaki steps forward first and Akira follows after her, untying his shoes and tucking them neatly beside hers, which sit against a pair of black, leather shoes that look like they might house Kitagawa-san's long, skinny feet.

"Let's head into the studio." Kitagawa instructs, outstretching an arm towards the staircase like he'd done the last time they'd been here. The odd stench- paint and rats and a starving artist- doesn't quite stun him as it had last time, but his nose still desires to hide itself from the smell, scrunching in on itself without him realizing it. Before he enters the studio, standing at yet another precipice, Takamaki drops a hand on his shoulder, making him jump. It's the same one that his schoolbag is hanging from. Without drawing Kitagawa-san's attention away from the paintbrushes in his hands, Takamaki transfers Morgana's weight into her own hands and quickly, but quietly, sets the bag down away from the doorway.

"Good luck." She whispers quietly, to him or Morgana he isn't sure. Then more loudly, startling him again, "Actually, I need to use the restroom. Kitagawa-kun, you can go ahead and start."

Kitagawa-san looks back at them- her- with wide eyes, blue like Morgana's, but inexplicably different. "O-oh, yes, of course. It's right down-" He tries, but is cut off by Takamaki yelling back, somehow down the hallway already without him having noticed. "I know where it is!"

He was alone. With Kitagawa.
"Please, sit." He says while taking a seat. The easel serves as a half-wall between them, blocking half of the other boy's starved form from him. He assumed the same went for him and Akira found it easier to perch himself on the stool than it had been the last time.

"The sketch I'd composed the last time we were together will serve as a sufficient base for what I'm about to do, but it's still important to have a frame of reference when one begins to paint" Kitagawa says from behind the easel. Akira's not sure why he does. The other boy falls silent after his explanation, his eyes flicker between him and the stand between them.

Akira watches his hands again. Kitagawa's long and thin fingers look even more so when he flicks the brush across the canvas in harsh strikes. The thin wood and dripping ivory from the actual brush draw out the thinness in the other man's features.

The shack shudders suddenly with a screech. Akira flinches at the sound, but feels an ever-familiar sense of terror when a voice calls out, "I'm home!"

"Sensei's home early." Kitagawa says to the canvas, mirroring Akira's own thoughts. He thought they would have until the gallery closed before Madarame returned.

Morgana and Takamaki hadn't given him any sign that they were through the lock- he wasn't even sure if Morgana had managed to get through the practice one, he hadn't even asked- and that lack of knowledge sent an additional wave of sweat folding down his back, making his uniform too hot, even as his skin shivered in dread.

Swallowing down the throbbing pain in his throat, Akira takes to his feet just as the floorboards beneath them start creaking.

_Draw Madarame into the un-locked room._ His objective rang clearly in his head, even as it throbbed painfully. Akira launched himself across the room, away from the door and further into the studio, and latched his fingers onto the canvas with a vice grip. The canvas was wet under his fingers, with a sponge-like texture. In his shaking, uncontrollable hands, the image that Kitagawa-san was making seemed impossibly fragile.

Even still, Akira launches across the room, lugging the dripping painting with him. It doesn't fit through the doorway without him turning sideways, but doing so allows him to keep walking towards his destination without having to look at either Kitagawa or Madarame as they both call out in unison.

He rushes through the unfamiliar hallway and meets two ends, one door is shut and the other is wide open, revealing a black abyss. A massive, golden lock rests on the floor in front of it. Its handle away from its body, pointing towards the ceiling, marking it as unlocked.

Akira rushes into the darkness with the painting threatening to slip from his fingers.

"Joker!" Morgana calls out. "Was that a cat?" Madarame's voice interrupts whatever Morgana had said next.

Light suddenly explodes into the room, blinding him for a moment before Kitagawa and Madarame are visible before him. Madarame is breathing heavily, more than Akira himself is. Kitagawa looks anywhere but at him.

"Sayuri..." The boy gasps, his skeletal hand stretch forwards, grabbing onto one of the canvasses that had been propped up in the room. Giving a glance around, the entire room seemed to be filled with paintings, a lot of them held the same identical form of a woman with black hair- one he
somehow recognized- but no Takamaki. Morgana was tucked away in the corner, hidden underneath an easel except for his wide blue eyes and white nose.

"But how?" Kitagawa drawls, clutching the painting to his chest. It, unlike the one in Akira's hands, is quite dry and doesn't drip or smear when he does this.

"Yusuke, explain this to me. What are you two doing in here!" Madarame shouts. His face is reddened under white facial hair, turning it pink; he looks nothing like the kind teacher that Kitagawa had introduced him to, nor what he'd seen at the exhibit. "I demand an explanation!"

"What the..." Kitagawa-san gasps, seemingly deaf to the man behind him. Akira watches the other boy grab onto yet another canvas in the stack, then another, and another, carding through them with a frown. "Counterfeits?"

Madarame sobers up instantly, his face returning to the calm from before. "There's a simple explanation for all of this, Yusuke. I wasn't keeping things from you, I assure you."

Kitagawa finally turns around, facing his mentor with one of the canvasses still tucked close to his chest and making Akira unable to see his face. "W-what is the meaning of this, sensei?"

Madarame sighs loudly, his posture slouching. The older man ducks his head to his student, but keeps an eye on him through a whitened eyebrow. "To be frank, I am in severe debt. Providing for you, bolstering your talents has taken a significant portion of my income and I didn't want to worry you with financial troubles. I didn't tell you to save you the strife of seeing your pitiful teacher this way, degrading himself to making copies..."

"But why?" Kitagawa gasps. "Why make these farces of your greatest work?" He says more firmly.

Madarame takes a moment to answer, the silent between their exchange feels like a lifetime, but was only a few heartbeats at most. "The real Sayuri was stolen from me long ago by one of my pupils. I assume he begrudged my... strictness. That moment was quite a shock for me, Yusuke, and since then I've been mired with a terrible artist's block."

"Joker." Morgana hisses, drawing his attention once more, but only for a moment before Madarame begins speaking again. "It's absence and my pupil's betrayal has left me with few options to ensure their livelihoods, yours included, Yusuke. They have, on occasion- much like you, yourself- have-gifted me their ideas over to me from time to time so that this place, Madarame's hands span outwards, gesturing to the space around them, "May continue to foster budding artists such as you."

Kitagawa glances down at the painting in his grip once again. "If we gave you our ideas, sensei, why did you feel the need to mar the Sayuri this way? I assumed you felt the same way that I did about her?"

Madarame clears his throat, then nods, "You should know, without doubt, Yusuke, of my affections for Sayuri. That's why I've attempted so many times to replicate her. It was to ensure that she was not lost forever to greed!"

"Still," The older man continues, "The beauty that you admire, as much of a cheap replica that it is, is still enough to draw buyers into purchasing one for themselves, knowing full well that they weren't the original. And, as expectations of me rose, I found myself forced to keep making them, for your sake as well as my own. I was... unable to pay the price for being famous. Please forgive me, your cowardly sensei, Yusuke."
Kitagawa stammers, taking a step forward, then another back. "Sensei, don't-"

Morgana's growl draws Akira's attention. He glances over just in time to see the coverings from the easel Morgana had been hiding under drop to the ground. The corner of the cover is clenched between Morgana's teeth, jumbling whatever his teammate says next.

"Sayuri!" Kitagawa cries out again, his gaze drawn by the noise. Akira feels himself being pushed out of the way as Kitagawa comes forward.

"Yusuke!" Madarame says loudly, but to no avail. The other boy's attention is fixed firmly on the recently-revealed painting.

"You said the original was gone, sensei." Kitagawa whispers towards the painting. The counterfeit that he'd been clutching to his chest drops to the floor, one of the wooden supports holding it together pops out, allowing the canvas to contort and fold in on itself at Kitagawa's feet.

"That is not the original!" Madarame protests, "It was stolen, like I said! That is merely another copy."

"No, sensei. This is the original Sayuri, I would know it anywhere, it has kept me going all this time! The reason I made it this far was because of her!" Kitagawa turns around and faces his teacher, "The truth, sensei." He pleads, "Tell me the truth."

"You would- After all this time, Yusuke? After all I've done?" Madarame doesn't wait for an answer before he's reaching into his yukata and pulling out a cell phone.

Akira feels his heart drop, even more so when he finally notices the furious expression that Madarame's face has warped into.

"There!" The elderly man says with a press of a button, "I've sent a report to my private security company!"

"Sensei!" Kitagawa protests, "We need to discuss this!"

Madarame smiles back sharply, "You can discuss it all you want with the police, Yusuke. I will simply claim I have no idea who either of you are or what you're doing in my home."

"Joker!" Morgana howls again, just before a shadow dances across the floor. Then the entire room becomes dark once more. "Activate the Nav!" He orders.

Akira nods into the dark and drops the painting of himself to tug at his pockets.

The MetaNav shines brightly in the dark room, and seems oddly cognizant when he activates it once more.

The ground underneath his feet disappears just as his head starts to throb. An upward wind flicks at his hair and dislodges his glasses, the painful air brushing past his face is enough to blind him.

He has no idea how long he falls for. Akira's only aware of his body tensing in reaction to colliding with the ground; he's survived being burnt and stabbed, but is certain that a drop would be enough to do him in.

Akira stops falling. His eyes refuse to open, unsure of what he might see.

"Ow!" Morgana's distinct voice calls out in front of him.
Akira peeks his eyes open and feels a familiar presence surrounding him.

_Arsene_. He recognizes and reaches out to place his hands—shaking and numb—onto the arms that had caught him. Without provocation, his persona tilts him upright and drops him onto his feet, which are as numb as his hands.

"Akira!" Someone else calls out. Suddenly he's standing between a grouping of his teammates with Arsene still floating just behind him, casting him in dark blue fire.

"Oh my..." Another familiar voice groans out. Akira feels his blood freeze over all at once and looks towards the source, hoping that he's just imaging it, that Madarame, like Kamoshida, had created a cognitive person.

Kitagawa takes to his feet, his frame is thin and gaunt, and flecked in paint. His fingers are skeletal and grasping at his thin face, pushing back dark hair. "W-what is this place?" He questions, staring wide-eyed at the glowing ceilings that pulse with life. They're right outside of where they'd been forced to stop, the unusual looking door is in on the floor, broke into pieces and smoldering like its been caught aflame. The lock and lasers are nowhere to be seen.

_We did it._ Akira acknowledges, taking in the sight.

"Kitagawa-kun?" Panther questions as if it could be anyone else.

"Is that Takamaki-san?" Kitagawa questions back, rubbing at his head. "Then you two must be..."

Kitagawa's eyes fall on him like a physical weight, icy blue pupils stare at him for a long time, studying him in the same way he'd done when they were on other ends of an easel. Only now, there was no wall between them.

Akira drops his chin, glancing towards the floor and notices that Kitagawa's feet are bare still. He's not sure why that would change, but it seems unnatural for them to be exposed.

"We should get out of here, it's not safe for non-persona users to be in a palace." Mona advises, stepping towards the array of doors that had lead up to this one.

Skull interjects before any of them start walking, "A-about that... there's kinda a lot of 'em out there... I dunno if we can bust or sneak through."

"What did you do!?" Mona accuses suddenly, eyes narrowing into a glare.

Skull swallows loudly, then bares his fist. "How'd you figure it was somethin' I did? Maybe it was you two that rattled the guy up!"

Morgana balks, then goes quiet and calm, "That... may actually hold some truth to it."

"Yeah!" The blond shoots back, "W-wait what?"

Morgana's oddly shaped head shakes sharply, "Now's not the time for that, we need to get Kitagawa to safety."

"Mona's right." Panther concedes.

"What is this place... Where's sensei? And the Sayuri? It was in my hands just moments ago!" Kitagawa questions rapidly. His tall frame spins around in a few circles and Akira takes a step back, confused.
Skull steps forward and grabs onto the artist's arm, "We'll take you back to your sensei, but you gotta listen to us." He orders firmly.

Kitagawa seems to calm at that, his head nods in assent.

"Let's go." Mona says with finality, leading the way towards the museum's exit.

Like Skull had said, the number of shadows had increased dramatically since the last time they'd been in. Groups of them roam together under a single form, creating multi-faced beasts that group up still; groups upon groups roam the halls of the quiet museum, guarding the palace.

Confrontations aren't easily avoided with multiple sets of eyes watching and Akira feels his energy starting to dwindle, like someone had drained the life from him, a number of times, Arsene's flames seem to flicker in and out of existence as they navigate through the endless halls.

At least we don't have to worry about money. Akira tries to placate himself, keeping his mind active in anyway he can. The exhaustion makes his mask feel ten times heavier than it usual is and he's starting to sink under the weight of it.

A massive shadow blocks the next doorway they're about to step through, spiraling into being with a squelching noise. Akira leaps backwards from it, but finds another one at his backside, and a few more starting to circle in on them, coming into being from nothing, but standing tall and imposing in an instant.

A deep laugh draws his attention away from the collapsing circle.

"What the hell!" Skull calls out. Kitagawa calls out too, "Sensei!"

It was true, underneath a garb of unfamiliar cloth and makeup stood Madarame. His old yukata had been replaced with gleaming, liquid gold, nearly matching the statue at his back that spiraled towards the darkened ceiling. His face was bleached white, stark against his already white hair. His lips were bright, bright red and smiled unnaturally beneath yellow- also golden- eyes.

"Welcome!" The elderly man continues, throwing his arms out in a wide gesture like he'd done minutes before. "To the museum of the master artist: Madarame!"

"Is that truly you, sensei?" Kitagawa calls out, his voice almost too soft to hear compared to Madarame's. "That attire... How did you? W-what it this place!?"

"This is what's truly inside your sensei's heart." Skull explains. "It's how he views the world, how he views himself. Just like Kamoshida..."

"My usual ragged attire is nothing but an act for the public." Madarame answers. "The same goes for that shack! I have another home of course, under a misstress' name. The famous Madarame living in a shack? Wearing those rags? Don't be preposterous." Another laugh draws Kitagawa to his knees.

"His heart?" Akira watches his head shake, "No, this must all be a joke!"

"Are you truly so naive?" Madarame questions, laughing yet again.

Kitagawa continues, unaware of the shadows closing in around them. "What of Sayuri? Why was she in the storage room? Why make copies if you had the original all this time? This can't be you, sensei!"
"Stupid child, can't you see? The stolen Sayuri was just a rumor of my own making. All of it was perfectly staged!" Another laugh, Madarame's head points towards the black and gold ceiling. "How's this sound, 'I found the real painting, but it can't go public... You can have it for a special price, though!' Art snobs just eat it up, and pay up good cash at that!"

"No!" Kitagawa denies.

Madarame nods despite Kitagawa not looking in his direction. "The worth of art is purely suggestive! Thus, they're all legitimate business transactions. I doubt a lesser artist could come up with such a brilliant scheme!"

"You keep going on and on about money this and money that!" Skull spits, not letting himself be interrupted by the guards herding them closer to Madarame's gilded form. "No wonder you ended up with this disgusting museum!"

"You're supposed to be an artist, right? Aren't you ashamed of stooping this low?" Panther shouts, only to be pushed onto her knees by one of the guards.

"Foolish brats! Art is nothing but a tool to gain money and fame!" Madarame answers, "And you, Yusuke, have helped me more than these urchins could ever! A fat cow of endless bounty!"

Kitagawa falls even flatter, almost bowing completely before his mentor. "B-but what about those who believe in you? That think you're a master artist?"

Madarame raises a hand in reply, "I'll advise you one last time, Yusuke, do not rise against me. Do you think that anyone could find success with my objection holding them down? Even someone of your talents would be reduced to face painting!"

"Are you truly this wretched?" Kitagawa questions bravely. Akira's not sure how the other boy continues to face forward.

Madarame laughs in his face once more, "You think I took you in out of the goodness of my heart? Artists in your situation are ripe for the plucking! You're not a cow at all, merely an apple from a tree I've so lovingly nurtured. After all, it's much easier to steal the futures of children who can't fight back."

Kitagawa gasps. "I can't believe this..."

"It's no different than rending leather from livestock!" Madarame laughs. The circle of shadows are close enough to link arms now. He and his teammates are just feet in front of Madarame with Kitagawa just in front of them.

"You are unforgivable." Kitagawa continues quietly. Somehow, he climbs to his feet, but even then his frame continues to shake and convulse. "It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done for me, I will never forgive you!"

Madarame's chin jerks upward, turning his nose up at his pupil. "This is how you repay me?" The man repeats. "You damn brat! Guards, dispose of these poisoned fruits!"

All at once, the shadows raise their arms, swords, spears and shields gleam brightly from non-existent light and make his stomach drop. They were going to die. There were too many for them to fight or outrun, especially with Kitagawa with them.

"...How amusing." Kitagawa murmurs, suddenly still. The other boy dissolves into a fit of giggles, long, skeletal fingers wrap around his sides as he bends over laughing. "It seems the truth is
stranger than fiction, hm?" He says cryptically.

"Kitawaga-kun?" Panther questions, climbing to her feet to grab onto the artist's arm.

"I wanted to believe that it wasn't true." Kitagawa confesses in his last moment. "I had clouded my own vision for so long. No! My eyes were truly blind, unable to see the truth behind the man I called sensei, the one I thought of as my father."

Kitagawa drops to his knees once more, clutching at his head. Akira remembers the pain of the MetaVerse only vaguely, a painful pressure telling him that he didn't belong. It would be an awful way to die.

Kitagawa scratches at the floor, at himself; he looks rabid, twitching and convulsing unnaturally.

With a flash of fire, a bright white glow envelops Kitagawa's face.

Impossible! Akira gapes, the grip on his weapons nearly causes them to slip from his fingers.

"Come, Goemon!" Kitagawa shouts, stomping his foot onto the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Heyo, sorry for the late update. I get addicted to things because that's how my brain works. Also, I'm working on staying up more than usual so I have more time to spend on my writing and drawing. As is, I can stay up for 24 straight hours without feeling tired and then sleeping for 12. Which is mathematically inefficient.

Anyways, as always, do let me know what you think.
Also, happy late birthday to Ryuji.
"Not impossible." Arsene corrects him, thundering inside of him with a folly of laughter. "Merely improbable."

Bright blue flames explode out from Kitagawa's body, a massive pillar shoots upwards from his form, nearly white for all it was blinding. The fire lapped outwards like waves of water, pushing and pulsing, and expanding endlessly. Kitagawa's light reveals the darkened ceiling, exposing the barely visible curls of the golden statue that spirals into the endless ceiling. Then it shoots outwards.

Shocked as he is, Akira does nothing as it happens. His legs refuse to respond, his hands curl around dangerous steel, but refuse to cause harm. The unfamiliar heat washes over him, warming him, but it does not burn or injure him; painless flames flicker over his feet, expanding outwards without lingering in the space around him. Growing higher, and as if they were made of nothing, the flames shoot upwards, now shooting out of Kitagawa's chest and through him- or maybe around him, he can't quite tell. The room fills with even more blinding heat.

He's still not injured.

The shadows surrounding the five of them start backing away, smudges of darkness that begin fading behind walls of shifting fire, but Madarame's gilded frame remains in front of all of them, seemingly unimpressed by Kitagawa's destructive display.

Akira's not sure if it's because of the fear that he, himself, is feeling, being too scared to react, to move or fight, or the opposite.

As quickly as the flames had appeared, ensconcing the museum with its azure glow and warmth, they vanish. In the center of it all stands Kitagawa, dressed in different clothing, his once paint-spotted, bleeding, and skeletal hands and feet are covered in dark material. But just as quickly as he notices that, the air in the room shifts yet again, a warning that he barely perceives before the space around him, and Kitagawa, and his teammates, seems to explode once again.

In the moment of calm, Akira catches a glimpse of Kitagawa and his teammates, all of them alive and standing, except Kitagawa's face was splashed in blood, the crimson trickled into his bright blue eyes and into the crevices of his sharp, curled smile. The expression sent shivers up his spine.

Pillars upon pillars of ice replace what had once been a similarly colored flame. Sharp, pointed edges explode outward in a wide, sweeping arc, piercing through several of the shadows that had been retreating. Human-sounding screams echo through the room, muffled by the sounds of ever-expanding ice. The ice is also what Madarame seems to react to, Akira catches his face morphing into something terrifying and infuriated just before the older man's golden attire beings to flows like liquid as he retreats towards the stairs. The ice follows, moving like a wall in Madarame's direction, expanding on itself in branches to reach him.

Akira remains still, watching; confused.

"A breathtaking sight!" Kitagawa's deep voice calls out, sounding impossibly loud, through the sounds of still shattering ice and colliding blades. It somehow catches Akira's attention. He turns
away from Madarame's fleeing form and the urge to chase after him, to find where the man is hiding the treasure, vanishes.

"Imitations they may be, but together, they make a fine spectacle. Though the flowers of evil blossom, be it known that abominations are fated to perish!" With a forceful shout, Kitagawa throws a hand towards his teacher, the man he'd called father moments ago, and a massive figure emerges from behind him. The figure's form is familiar, but not, dressed in traditional clothing from a period he can't quite name. It's not dissimilar to how Madarame had dressed in the real world, in yukata of simple colors. Kitagawa's persona was more human-like than any he'd seen before. It draws his attention more than the shining blade arcing downwards and towards Madarame's shadow.

The blade misses and whistles past where Madarame's head had just been. The blade pierces into the golden stairwell, shattering one of the large steps; a massive pillar of ice, a twin to the hundreds- or maybe thousands- that were sweeping across the room, launches skyward from the destruction, obscuring Madarame from view for just a moment before the man reaches the peak of the stairs.

With another shout from Kitagawa, the ice around chasing after Madarame moves even faster, throwing itself with impossible speed towards the fleeing man. An avalanche of ice shatters against a quickly shut door, exploding in hundreds of sharps spears that fall to the ground, shattering further as they do.

Akira glances, finally, towards Kitagawa. Watches the other boy march over the field of ice he'd just created in attempt to chase after his retreating mentor. Akira also watches him fall over, collapsing onto himself.

The room goes quiet. The fighting, the screaming, the shattering, exploding ice. All of it disappears when Kitagawa falls to his knees at the frozen over steps that Madarame had just fled upon.

"H-how many..." Kitagawa huffs, his breath appears with clouds of vapor, spilling out in front of him. "How many dreams did you exchange for riches, sensei?"

More ice, somewhere behind where Akira's gaze is glued on this stranger's form, shatters, crashing down. Pellets of ice flick at his legs, but Akira barely notices them.

Kitagawa reaches out with bright blue gloves, clawing at the frozen over steps the same way he'd done at the floor earlier. A massive, form floats over him, sword in hand, matching the one that was strapped to Kitagawa's back.

*Persona.* Akira recognizes, but does nothing else. He's not even sure what he can do, let alone should.

"How many did you trample upon?" Kitagawa falters again and falls flat against the stairs, his head knocks loudly against one of the steps. He remains still, breathing heavily against the icy surface and sending plumes of steam towards the now darkened ceiling.

"Kitagawa!" Takamaki- Panther- shouts. Ice crunches to his side, growing louder until he sees her run past him and crouch by Kitagawa's now prone form.

Her arms scoop under Kitagawa's still form, red and pink contrasting with icy blues and whites. At the same time, Akira feels something scooping over his own shoulders and neck, unusually warm; a similar feeling grows against one leg.
"You okay, dude?" Skull asks, suddenly close. His face is bleeding and Akira looks away from it. A yellow glove hangs off of his shoulder, the rest of his teammate is hanging off the other. The blond is shaking, something Akira can feel almost as deeply as his still racing heart.

Akira finally gets himself to nod, bobbing his head. He's not sure if it's a lie or not. He feels numb. Moments before, he'd been faced with imprisonment, then with death. Paint was still drying on his fingers under his gloves and his chest was being hammered against with a force he can't quell. He feels hot, though he know he shouldn't be, the entire room was encased in ice after all, and Skull's shivering finally made him realize it.

"J-Joker?" Morgana stammers, drawing his attention downwards. The cat is shivering too, pressed against his leg and shaking, his sword is still in hand though, trembling in his grip.

"We should p-probably go check on him, huh?" Skull suggests, gesturing with one hand- the one hanging from Akira's shoulder- towards Panther and Kitagawa.

Akira nods once again, something about the instruction finally gets his body to react to his instructions. Skull finally pulls away from him and Morgana does the same, both of them drawing close to each other as they walk towards the other pair. Akira steps forward as well, but stops once again, and stares down at his feet.

The golden flooring lies under his boots, unhindered by the ice. Glancing behind him, he notices much of the same, a large yellow circle, before sharp arrays of ice start piercing through the space, creating walls and spikes where nothing had been; a lot of it is blocking the door, which is something he should be worrying about, but can't seem to manage. Kitagawa's attack hadn't hurt him at all, nor any of the phantom thieves, but had managed to destroy all of Madarame's guards and almost the man himself.

It had been devastating. In a matter of moments, Kitagawa had created so much, had done so much. It was even more destructive than Panther's awakening, and much, much more than his own had been.

Nothing about Kitagawa had seemed- Akira's not sure what to call it, nothing sounded correct, he barely knew Kitagawa and only met him a few times- off, nothing that would have lead to this moment. Nothing about the artist, who'd dispelled Sakamoto's judgments about Madarame so quickly and assured them that everything was fine, told him that this could have happened; that Kitagawa had the will to rebel, that he had something to rebel, caught him off guard.

Akira knows that it shouldn't. Kamoshida had awoken the same instinct in the three of them. A fear so primal, a desperation to stay alive that Akira couldn't replicate, a conviction that he still finds himself doubting, and something else that he doesn't know the name of. All of that had awoken his other half, had caused Arsene to make the same flames and cause the same destruction.

Kitagawa Yusuke was so much like him as well.

But that wasn't true either. Akira could never face his parents- or even just his father- like Kitagawa had just done. He could never call Arsene to help him in the same situation. Yet Kitagawa had done just that! The other boy had called forth a power like his own and struck out at his teacher.

It was...

*Amazing.* Akira envies Kitagawa. A bone-deep jealousy to replicate him, to be like him, pervades every part of him for an instant. He wonders if the artist was who Morgana had been looking for
all the time he'd spent with Akira instead.

Akira steps forward, unsure of his footing or standing, and stares down at Kitagawa's slumped form. The other boy's head is elevated in Panther's lap, cushioning it from the icy floor the rest of his body is subjected to.

His words shoot out with tendrils of icy air. "Please... I need to keep going!" He pleads quietly.

"Kitagawa-kun, you're completely drained right now!" Takamaki says sharply, but just as quietly. "Even if we did find him, you don't have enough strength to fight him!"

"Please, Takamaki-san." Kitagawa pleads still. The artist attempts once again to climb back to his feet, to chase after Madarame, but can barely lift himself before he's falling back against Takamaki once again. "What a disgrace I am..."

"Just listen to her, man." Skull tries. The blond takes a seat next on the frozen steps, which crunches under his weight. "We need to get you outta here."

"Out?" Kitagawa huffs, his breath bursting forward like a bullet. "I've only just arrived here, in sensei's heart of all places. I have no intention of leaving this place until I pull answers unyielding from him! The veil in front of me has been lifted finally and you want me to put myself back under because of mere exhaustion?"

"I know." Skull says in return.

"You know?" Kitagawa snaps back, "How could you possibly-"

Skull cuts him off, "I know! You're probably feelin' like you need to go after that asshole or whatever, to get the truth or revenge. I know because I've been there. We all have, all four of us. We had someone just like your sensei- I mean, not just like, but he was pretty damn bad. A-anways, what I'm sayin' is, me, Ann, and him, we've all been through this, so you gotta listen to us or you're just gonna get hurt."

Just over his teammate's shoulder, Morgana nods silently.

"He's right, Kitagawa-kun." Panther agrees. "It may not feel like it right now, but we do know what you're going through. And you may not like it, but the best thing to do right now is to get you out of here."

"And where would I go?" The artist questions quietly. "I've been disowned, no, let go, to be more precise."

His teammates, in unison, look back at him, but say nothing.

Akira says nothing as well.

"But perhaps you're correct, Takamaki-san. I am feeling quite drained all of a sudden." Kitagawa continues.

"Gee, thanks." Skull says quietly. Kitagawa, despite being hit with Skull's breath, doesn't seem to react at all to the blond's words.

"Great!" Takamaki says, maneuvering her shoulder under Kitagawa's. Without prompt or provocation, Skull does the same thing on the artist's other side, leaving the boy between them lopsided, but standing.
"You an' Morgana are gonna have to lead us outta here." Skull advises, hauling Kitagawa towards icy field he'd created earlier.

Akira nods back and waits for Morgana to step beside him before they start walking towards the exit.

"It's frozen over." Morgana points out. "Do you think you can melt it, Joker? Trying to smash through all of this would take hours."

Closing his eyes, Akira sinks back into the other part of himself- the place where Arsene and his other personas linger. With the chill working its way through his fingers and toes, it's harder to reach that place, but when he calls out, grasping at another presence, one of them answers his call and sets the space in front of them ablaze. The fire's heat feels alien as it penetrates through his coat and into his skin, but he refuses to relax into it, to be caught in another set of fetters. Kitagawa's fire and ice had stunned him earlier, but he couldn't afford to do it a second time; nobody else was around to awaken a destructive power capable of saving them.

Blocks of ice crumbled down from the wall and doorway, shattering like glass onto the frozen, golden floor. Morgana's persona was able to sweep the larger chunks away from the doorway with a gust of wind and the door swept open easily, but loudly, creaking in ways it hadn't the previous times they'd been through it.

"I caused this..." Kitagawa observes quietly. Neither Panther, nor Skull answer him, so Akira doesn't turn around. With Morgana at his side, he continues leading the five of them through the museum's corridors. His grasp on Arsene's presence is almost as tight as his grip on his weapons and the fight or flee makes his shoulders tense up; with a group this size, it'd be difficult to run away without alerting any other shadows, but fighting would mean it would just be him and Morgana defending the other three and Akira's not sure he's capable of doing so completely.

They manage to get to the galleries they'd entered from before they catch a shadow's attention. The flashlight in its hand washes over them, only partially blinding. It takes a moment for the thing to recognize what they are, but before it can shout at them or call for help, Morgana's sword is slashing outwards, knocking the guard off balance.

"Please!" It begs, melting into a smaller form. "Spare me!"

"Wait!" Arsene orders. Akira freezes, then side-steps in front of Morgana just before his teammates takes another swing.

"Mercy!" It cries out again. Black ooze drips off its body, revealing a bulbous head- not dissimilar to Morgana's, though bright white where Morgana is dark, and tear-filled eyes.

"The request." Arsene points out to him. "It's him. The abomination the warden spoke of."

Akira nods to his other half and digs into the pocket of his coat. The folded and yellowed paper does little to hide the resemblance between the drawing and what's in front of them.

*Jack Frost.* He reads once more. The thing steps forward once more, its beady eyes drip tears as the shadow looks up at him. Akira steps forward as well and the sudden proximity is enough for the monster to disintegrate entirely, leaving nothing but traces of light as it rushes towards him. A phantom touch pushes into his mind and body, carving a place among Arsene and the others within him.

"Amazing..." Morgana whispers into the gallery.
"W-wait!" Kitagawa suddenly calls out, just as Akira is about to continue forward. He turns around just in time to see the artist stumble onto the floor in front of him.

"Hey!" Panther shouts loudly. She stumbles forward as well and tries to reform her grip on the boy's arms, but Kitagawa crawls away from her grasp and towards the wall.

"Senpai..." Kitagawa suddenly says, staring up at the painting of Nakanohara.

"Senpai?" Skull questions, "You know Nakanohara?"

"I could ask the same of you, although you all do have a background in art so it might make sense that you'd be familiar with him... Regardless, Sensei Madarame told me he was the one to steal the Sayuri from him, but... why is he here? Framed in sensei's heart?"

"You're here too." Skull comments.

"That's not exactly the truth..." Panther answers. Her hands twist around the coils of her weapon, making it squeak quietly.

"The truth?" Kitagawa echoes from his place in front of Nakanohara.

"We aren't involved in the art community, not in the way you think anyway." She answers. "Akira-kun isn't a model and Ryuji and I don't work for him."

Skull snorts. "I didn't even know who Madarame was until like, two weeks ago."

Kitagawa leans sideways, towards Takamaki, the sword strapped to his back knocks loudly against the floor. "You deceived me?" He questions, "To get to close to Madarame?"

Panther nods.

Kitagawa nods back, then goes limp. His head tilts backwards and Akira catches the bright blue of the artist's eyes.

"This place is made from Madarame's twisted desires." Morgana picks up in a whisper, stepping to Kitagawa's contorted form. "Anything that he desires strongly enough shows up in this place."

Kitagawa leans forward, away from him and back towards the painting, then glances down at Morgana. Even on his knees, the artist towers over him. "A talking cat..."

"I am-!" Morgana snaps, loudly, but cuts himself off to whisper harshly in Kitagawa's face. "I am not a cat!"

"Sensei's desires..." Kitagawa continues, as if Morgana hadn't said anything at all. The artist turns towards Panther, "You said I was framed here as well? I need to see this, then we may leave."

"Then we may leave." Skull hisses quietly.

"You were the one who told him!" Panther whispers harshly towards Skull before turning back to Kitagawa, who's finally climbing to his feet. "We really should go, Kitagawa-kun." Akira agrees. He casts a glance around the gallery, checking for shadows or guards; their absence fills him with dread instead of the relief he thought it might.

"Please." Kitagawa begs. "I need to understand. To see with my own eyes."

Panther gives in, so he does as well, and she leads the way across the gallery where Kitagawa's
form is hanging on the wall.

With Kitagawa here, right in front of Madarame's image of the other boy, he's able to notice the differences between the painting and what Kitagawa actually looks like. Madarame's creation of the other artist is still as tall as he normally is, but the pale lines that make up Kitagawa's likeness are too far apart to look real. Kitagawa's skin cradles his frame sharply, his bones are sharp edges that Akira recognizes in himself. The boy in the picture is smiling as well, something he'd only just seen when it was soaked in blood; the Kitagawa in the picture would never laugh in his mentor's face.

"This is what he thinks of me?" Kitagawa asks himself, staring back at his likeness. "This is how sensei desires me?"

"Dude, wording!" Skull bellows, then clamps a hand over his own mouth with an audible slap. The blond continues, muffled by yellow fingers. "Can we go now?"

"Please, Kitagawa-kun." Panther asks, placing a hand on the artist's arm. "We can explain everything once we get to somewhere safe."

Kitagawa nods and moves when Panther pushes against him.

"I've never done anything like this before." Kitagawa eventually pants out while grappling himself towards the roof. It lingers for a while, as neither of his teammates say anything, and Akira, with his hands full of rope, can't respond. The other boy ascends the rope with surprising ease and only stumbles when he reaches the top, rolling onto the roof with a loud crash.

Below him, Skull sighs, but says nothing.

"It's beautiful." Akira catches while hoisting himself over the skylight's edge. After finding his footing, he looks over and finds Kitagawa and Panther by the roof's edge. Both of them are seated on the lip and Akira feels his tongue dry up in his mouth.

Thoughts of Suzui make him stumble where he's standing.

Someone- Ryuji, as he's the only one available to be behind him- places a hand on his shoulder. The weight threatens to buckle what's left of his integrity, but weighs him down as well, settling the bile churning low in his gut.

"Kira, you okay?" The weight asks. He's not sure why.

Akira nods.

Skull retreats, patting him on the shoulder.

In truth, it felt like forever since he'd thought about Suzui, let alone witnessed what he had. Did he even have the right to have such reactions.

_Takamaki seems fine._ He notes; all of them seem fine. She's on the edge as well, sitting with Kitagawa. Both of them were unafraid.

"It looks better looking out than looking in, that's for sure." Panther finally replies. She laughs too.

With Kitagawa with them, it takes longer leaving the MetaVerse than it had entering it; the other boy stopping at various locations to observe part of his teacher's heart and question their meanings, but the darkness around them eventually shuddered into streets lit in fading sunlight.
Madarame's shack sat across from them and a set of unease set across his shoulders. In front of the dilapidated stone wall sat a number of belongings that hadn't been there before; three identical schoolbags were stacked beside a small, purple suitcase. Beside the suitcase sat a canvas he recognized only by the fingerprints that he knew were his.

"You really weren't joking," Sakamoto drawls, walking over and scooping their schoolbags from in front of the gate. Strolling back over, the blond hands both him and Takamaki one before scooping the last under his shoulder. Akira unzips his, offering it to Morgana.

The cat leaps into the opened folds, and rummages around with a loud crinkling noise before settling.

"I will admit, I didn't expect to be made to leave so quickly." Kitagawa admits, walking over as he'd done earlier to kneel in front of a canvas. Takamaki followed after him, standing close while the artist shrunk low to the ground, revealing the painting to him once more.

Akira turns away from it. "You think he can stay with you or something?" Sakamoto questions when he does.

He shakes his head more on instinct than anything. Sakura-san had been upset with him after bringing Morgana- Kaito- to the cafe, he's not sure how the older man would handle another person.

Ryuji sighs. The gust it makes pelts against hair and makes his ear tingle; Akira shudders despite the warm air. The other boy was really too close.

"My ma would probably say it's okay..." Sakamoto says, the hand hanging around his shoulder flips in circles. "But I dunno. She's workin' late an' would probably freak if she saw a weirdo like him in our apartment."

Akira remains still, unsure what to say to that or if any response at all was necessary.

"Still, worst thing is we shack him up with Ann." Ryuji laughs, squeezing the arm around his neck and pulling him closer. Akira is finally let go after a long moment of being pulled against the other and feels tension starting to drain out of him as the distance between them starts to grow.

"You really have no place to go?" He hears Takamaki ask, pulling his attention away from his own discomfort. The blonde is still standing next to Kitagawa, who's taken to leaning against the stone wall he's just been exiled from.

"Unfortunately, no." Kitagawa's deep voice responds. "Kosei offers such facilities in my scholarship, but since I was living with sensei, I hadn't filled out any of the necessary documents. I wonder now if that, too, will be taken from me, now that I'm no longer his pupil."

Ryuji steps forward with a sharp intake of breath, "Come on, dude. Nothing's gonna happen for you from just sitting out here, you look like a lost dog or something." The blond extends a hand to the artist, who stares at it with a frown. "We'll get you something to eat, then we can worry about your little problem."

"Unfortunately, no." Kitagawa's deep voice responds. "Kosei offers such facilities in my scholarship, but since I was living with sensei, I hadn't filled out any of the necessary documents. I wonder now if that, too, will be taken from me, now that I'm no longer his pupil."

Takamaki laughs, though Akira can't figure out why. "There's nothing little about being homeless, Ryuji. Er, that was insensitive of me, I'm sorry Kitagawa-kun."

Kitagawa shakes his head, making his dark hair messy against his forehead. "There's no need to worry, Takamaki-san. If anything, your bluntness has makes digesting the situation a little easier."

Sakamoto laughs, bending over himself while he does. It's loud enough that Akira worries about Madarame- or maybe one of the neighbors- taking notice of them and calling the police.

"I am not blunt, Ryuji!" Takamaki says once more, shouting. She turns to him suddenly, "You don't think I'm blunt, right, Akira? Morgana?"

Underneath his shoulder, Morgana clears his throat. "N-not at all, Lady Ann."

"You're lying!" She snaps, pointing towards the cat and- he can't help but find- thankfully, ignoring him. Takamaki groans. "Anyways! Ryuji's right, we should go. We can try contacting the school or something on the way."

"A meal does sound nice." Kitagawa admits over her, pushing away from the wall of his old home. Suddenly, the artist towers over both Sakamoto and Takamaki.

"R-right." Takamaki says.

Without another word, the three of them start walking in the direction of the station and towards the setting sun, leaving him and Morgana behind for a moment before he remembers to follow after them.

"Do you have a favorite place to eat, Kitagawa-kun?" Takamaki broaches, "I think comfort food is the best for something like this."

"Comfort food?" Kitagawa repeats as the four of them step into the terminal. His messy hair shakes once more. "Sensei and I don't- didn't go out to many restaurants, I'm afraid. I have no idea what would be considered comfort food."

"Er, right." Takamaki says again. Sakamoto jumps into the conversation, leaning close to Kitagawa. "Ramen, for sure. Or maybe a meat bowl? Something with meat in it!"

"Hm? Yes, I suppose so." Kitagawa answers quietly, tugging his suitcase closer to him. "To be honest, though, I feel more tired than hungry at the moment."

Takamaki nods. "I felt the same way as well right after I got my persona."

"Ditto." Ryuji chimes in at the same time Kitagawa asks another question. "Persona?"

"We'll explain once we sit down somewhere." The blond assures, "Somewhere close by then?"

Close by, in Sakamoto's words, still requires a lot of walking. On the way, Akira feels himself starting to nod off several times, his body going limp for a moment as the world goes black, only to jerk back into standing once he feels himself starting to fall over.

The restaurant that Sakamoto leads them to is the same one that Iwai had taken him to. It was still dark, but clean, as it had been the last time he had come. The only difference was that he was feeling quite tired; the booth under him seemed to cradle him more than it had the last time and his back started to droop in on itself whereas it had refused to do so when Iwai had been here.

Akira folded his arms onto the tabletop and rested his head on top of them. This time it was just a restaurant, nothing more.
“Come on, man, don't do that.” Ryuji’s voice breaks through the blankness his mind had been building up. Something, a hand or maybe a shoe, presses at his arm and he knows that the other is talking to him. "You're gonna make me fall asleep, too."

The blond scoots in beside him. Akira forces himself to sit up before he does actually fall asleep. Takamaki scoots in next to Sakamoto and Akira pushes himself closer to the wall.

"Honestly," Takamaki starts, but interrupts herself with a yawn. "I feel the same way. Are we always gonna be so tired when we go there, Morgana?"

Underneath his arm, but mostly on his lap, Morgana stirs. "Due to how the MetaVerse functions, you'll probably feel the effects each time you come out; the strain on your spirit to project your rebellion is quite-“ Morgana yawns as well. His teeth glow with a yellow sheen underneath the lights hanging over the table. "Taxing. It's like spending twice as much energy in the same amount of time."

"God, that sucks." Ryuji complains with a groan. His head falls onto his arms, mirroring what the blond had just scolded him for.

"It might get better the more we expose ourselves to it." Morgana yawns once again, sharp teeth on display with the smell of his breath. "But the best thing we can do now is rest between trips. If people start getting suspicious because you all look like walking corpses, then it can only spell bad news for the Phantom Thieves."

"Phantom Thieves?" Kitagawa repeats. The artist is sitting across from them, alone. The canvas from before is leaned against the booth next to him, his suit case is on the other side, trapping him from either end.

Next to him, Sakamoto perks up, making the seat bounce underneath him. "Y'know? The Phantom Thieves of Hearts?"

Kitagawa blinks slowly, then responds. "No. I don't think I have."

"It was on the news..." Sakamoto mutters. Takamaki takes over for him and Kitagawa turns to her when she starts talking. "Have you heard about anyone called Kamoshida? From Shujin Academy?"

Kitagawa nods. "The school teacher who confessed in front of the entire school. Yes, I've heard of him; is he somehow related to Sensei- Madarame?"

Takamaki nods, long hair bobbing forward. "Yes- well, sort of. Kamoshida only confessed because of the Phantom Thieves."

"They made him confess?" Kitagawa questions. "How did they manage?"

"That world that you saw, and that version of Madarame that you saw. They're both real. Well, um, kind of real? Mostly real? It's like um-" She trails off.

Morgana half-climbs onto the table, leaving his lower paws to dig painfully into his thighs. "It's like an alternate reality. What we did was open a door into Madarame's heart and mind. Everything that's distorted him was in that museum that we were in. What phantom thieves do is infiltrate these cognitive worlds- we call them palaces- and destroy them by grabbing the core of the world, called treasures."

Kitagawa nods once more. "This would somehow cause Madarame to confess?"
Morgana nods back, his ears flicking backwards. "There is a possibility that the palace ruler might suffer a mental shutdown, however."

"Mental shutdown?" Kitagawa huffs, his face, cast in golden light, twists with a smile. He laughs quietly. "Sensei might become one of those?"

Kitagawa stands suddenly, then is bowing over the table. Akira jerks backwards as the artist's head almost comes into contact with Morgana's. "Then I'd ask to join you."

Sakamoto recovers first, "Y-you wanna join?"

Takamaki a hand forward, placing it on Kitagawa's folded back. "Even if Madarame were to die?"

The contact, or maybe the question, makes the artist slide back into his seat and stare back at them once more. "Don't misconstrue my intentions, Takamaki-san. I owe Madarame a great debt, regardless of how terrible he is; he took me in when there was no one, I cannot simply forget that in light of what I saw today."

Takamaki's hand, which had fallen onto the table when the artist retreated slides back into his lap. "Yet," Kitagawa continues after a pause, "I believe what I saw today. Sensei has become corrupted. If those truly were his thoughts, it is undeniable. After the core of his desires were taken, would he revert to who he was before?"

"It's possible, but after we get the treasure, if that doesn't cause a mental breakdown, he'd likely to confess to everything he's done and might be imprisoned." Morgana explains. The mention of prison sends a chilly ripple up his spine. "I'd still like to join." Kitagawa states.

Sakamoto turns to him. Takamaki leans down towards the table and stares at him as well. Finally, Morgana twists in his lap to catch his eye. "Joker?" The cat finally questions.

They're asking me? Is his first reaction before he remembered that he was the supposed leader.

"Joker?" Kitagawa ponders aloud.

Akira nods towards Morgana and his teammate turns back around. The other two follow his lead.

A weight sinks in his stomach, wondering if he'd end up regretting this. Kitagawa was powerful, his awakening had shown him that much, yet the other was still loyal to Madarame. It should make him suspicious or more worried, yet something about Kitagawa grasped something inside of him, the same invisible force that connected him with the other phantom thieves.

Blinking hard and with intention, Akira's field of vision shifted into vast shades of blue. Glancing down at his chest, he saw the same strands that had always been there.

He glances towards the boy across the table, but spots nothing. The two of them didn't share a connection, yet Akira still felt as though they might.

"You would have me?" Kitagawa questions again.

"Yep!" Sakamoto chirps. A hand crosses over Akira's shoulders, jostling him. The sudden weight shatters his concentration. "If he says it's alright, then it's alright."

"He didn't say anything." Kitagawa points out, staring right at him. Despite years of being the way
he was, nobody—except for Sakura-san—had been that straightforward about it and Akira feels his face heat up under the sudden attention.

"He's different." Arsene articulates with a laugh.

"Uh, Akira-kun can't talk." Takamaki says for him, just like she had for the reporter in front of Madarame's shack.

"Oh, I see." Kitagawa replies, taking a hand to his chin. "That explains why my attempts at small talk failed so miserably."

Small talk? Akira's brain filters slowly. He couldn't recall Kitagawa ever talking to him directly, small talk or not.

"Er, anyways, just make sure you keep your phone charged, 'cause he'll be texting you if you're serious about being a phantom thief." Ryuji instructs, leaning forward to rest his chin on his arm.

"I'll be sure to do that."

"Now we just gotta find you a place to stay." Sakamoto continues with a yawn.

Akira yawns as well.

"Did you have any luck with the school?" Takamaki questions.

Kitagawa shakes his head, his floppy hair drops over his eyes. "There was no answer."

Through the space between Sakamoto's arm and chest, Akira catches Takamaki peering through. "D'you think he can stay with you, Akira-kun?"

Akira's about to shake his head when Morgana starts answering for him. "I'm not sure Boss will like that, Ann."

"Boss?" She questions next.

"Yeah, he's taking care of this guy." Morgana gestures towards him with a bob of his head, "But I dunno if he'll want any more animals around. He'd probably just rename him."

Sakamoto snorts, then asks, turning towards him. "Rename?"

"Yes!" Morgana shouts, "Boss tried to rename me and Joker didn't even say anything!"

Takamaki snorts as well. "W-well, what did he change your name to?"

Morgana sighs, then turns to glare at him. "Kaito." He says right into Akira's face.

"It's a little on the nose, don't you think?" Ryuji comments with a smile. Takamaki frowns, "You don't think he's suspicious about us, do you?"

"It was before we were officially phantom thieves, there's no way he could have known." Morgana explains.

Takamaki nods, "So that's out..." She sighs loudly, then groans. "Fine!"

"Fine?" Ryuji mutters, still turned towards him and not their speaking teammate.
"You can stay with me. Just for until you can get your school stuff handled, okay?"

"Okay." Kitagawa says with preamble.

"My parents should be home sometime next week. So no funny stuff!" She continues, picking up volume.

"I'm not one for jokes, Takamaki-san." The artist says calmly.

Ryuji snorts, still eyeing him instead of the others. Akira keeps his gaze on the table.

"Not like that!" She hisses violently. "Just don't try anything! And don't let anyone see you."

"I'll do my best." Kitagawa responds, still calm. "You have my utmost gratitude, Takamaki-san."

"Meeting over?" Sakamoto questions when the table falls silent.

Takamaki hums quietly, "Mhm."

"Good 'cause I'm dying. Tired and dying." Sakamoto yawns. Takamaki agrees quietly as Ryuji reaches over and presses a button on the table that Akira hadn't noticed before.

"Oh." Kitagawa says after the waitress is gone. "I didn't bring any money."

"I got it." Ryuji supplies, waving his free hand.

The food arrives quickly, much like it had the last time he'd been here. But, despite not ordering anything, a plate and bowl are pushed in front of him; a mistake somewhere.

"You were zonin' out." Sakamoto starts explaining, something in his reaction seems to have caught the other's attention. "So I ordered for ya. Hope you don't mind."

Akira shakes his head, still eyeing the food. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had anything to eat. The stress of dealing with Kitagawa and Madarame, as well as school, had made it slip his mind at some point.

Explains why I'm so exhausted. Akira thinks, casting a look down at Morgana, who'd slunk off of the table and onto his lap. The cat stared back at him, ocean blue eyes wide open in the table's dark underneath.

Feeling guilty, Akira starts feeding himself before offering anything to his teammate. Morgana continues watching the entire time in between moments of gorging himself on strips of meat.

Sakamoto ends up paying for both him and Kitagawa, as well as himself. It makes the food inside of him sink even further; his stomach cramps in rebellion and Akira offers his thanks as quickly as he can. The blond waves him off, though.

Takamaki and Kitagawa leave first. "We'll make sure the coast is clear." She promises, taking Kitagawa's painting, before leading the artist away.

Minutes pass before Sakamoto tells him that they can leave. "They're off the train, miss prez isn't lookin' for any of us; it's probably past her bedtime." He yawns.

Akira nods, gathering Morgana and his bag before following Sakamoto out of the restaurant, making sure to keep the cat hanging from his shoulder unseen from others. It was completely dark when they walked outside, yet the streets of Shibuya seemed even brighter than they had been.
before. Bright, multi-colored lights guided their silent walk towards the station.

"See ya tomorrow." The blond says quietly, throwing up a hand before disappearing into the sea of people.

Feeling heavy, Akira climbs onto the next train towards Yongen-Jaya and sinks into a seat with a sigh. The city passed through the windows in a shaky blur, a myriad of lights blinded him, then utter darkness seemed to envelop the train for a long time before it finally stopped in front of the Yongen station.

The streets of Yongen were lit up by dim yellow lights that seemed almost too dark compared to the place he'd just been. Akira's feet dragged through golden splashes until he finally pushed through LeBlanc's entrance, keying himself into the dark cafe. Sakura-san wasn't behind the counter, as far as he could tell and he was the only one in the building, aside from Morgana.

He drops the other onto the bed and tugs off his school blazer and shoes before climbing under the covers. With the last of his energy, Akira plugs his phone in and drops his glasses onto the closest shelf. His bag rustles noisily for a while as Morgana pulls himself out of it, then the cat is resting beside him just before he falls asleep.

The sound of water splashing against the ground wakes him up. It echoes into his ears and makes him aware of how cold it is. When he slides his feet over the edge of the bed, the floor rattles noisily. The floor is freezing and cold against his skin and makes him shiver. His ankle is even colder, almost painfully so, and heavy.

I'm back again. Akira notices vaguely, pushing hair away from his face.

"Trickster, you've come." Igor's voice ruminates deeply. Akira nods, unsure if the man can see him, and takes to his feet to approach the gate between them. "You've made contact with another palace. Good. I trust you are growing used to infiltrating them by now?"

Akira's unsure of that, but Igor smiles back at him from behind his desk, same as always. It makes him even more unsure. Was there something more he could be doing?

"Our services are always open to you, Trickster, so long as you hold steadfast to the responsibilities of your rehabilitation. But allow me to emphasize once more the importance of your bonds. The Phantom Thieves of Hearts, as you have so named yourselves, will be found lacking without the support of others. To go without them would be most detrimental." Igor's words sound more like a warning than advice, Chouno-sensei had sounded the same way, like there was a context Akira wasn't able to see properly and, therefore, not able to grasp fully.

Akira nods, feeling guilty.

Igor laughs and stands up. He's shorter than Akira is, slouching over himself with his chin sticking upwards. "Now, that's all I have to say to you, I believe, however, that your wardens would like a word with you." The man steps backwards, disappearing behind a door Akira had never noticed before.

The gate in front of him makes a sudden noise, like thunder, and Akira flinches backwards. Justine and Caroline slide in front of the cell door with matching expressions, their golden eyes staring up at him widely and unblinking. Akira lowers his own gaze, towards his bare feet and the chains coiling around them.

"I sense you've completed our task. The persona, Jack Frost, resides within you, does he not?"
Justine questions.

"Oh ho!" Jack Frost says cheerfully from within, as if called upon by Justine.

"Call him forth, inmate!" Caroline orders.

Akira nods down at his feet, then exhales deeply, trying to concentrate against the cell's iciness. He sinks into himself, grasping at the same power that Arsene had awoken inside of him. He wades through the presences of the others, each of them reaches out, but flow past like river water. Jack Frost's presence is colder than the others, like grasping ice, and when Akira grabs onto him that chill pushes through him until it explodes outwards.

The persona appears with a burst of flame and glows with blue fire. "It is I!" Jack Frost greets him, blank, black eyes stare up at him.

Akira pushes himself off the ground, unsure when he'd fallen.

"He's smaller than usual." Justine notes quietly. Caroline continues, just as quietly, "Yeah, inmate, did you have to bring us such a weak specimen?"

Justine flicks over a page from her clipboard and begins writing. Her singular eye glances continuously between the papers in her hands and the persona in front of her.

Jack Frost remains still during the entire process and Akira does the same, standing behind the still fiery persona as Justine continues writing. The scratching of her pen on the paper, and the continuous sound of water dripping somewhere, are the only noises around, yet both are enough to keep him conscious and alert.

Something about the Velvet Room felt unusual today. The timeless place seemed darker, like it might be nighttime somewhere outside of the stone and metal walls. Igor's exit was also unusual. The previous - though few - times he'd been in this prison, the long-nosed man had never left from behind his desk; now he was nowhere to be seen.

"Still," Justine says suddenly with a smile, "Despite its weakness, you did accomplish the goal we set out for you."

"I guess so." Caroline comments before continuing for her twin and also adopting a smile, "For that, I think the inmate deserves some praise for finishing your penal labor. If you continue at this rate, you may actually complete your rehabilitation..."

Jack Frost turns away from the two wardens and stares up at him as well, drawing his attention. Akira has a hard time staring back into his dark eyes, "I-I'm not small, am I?" He questions.

Akira isn't sure how to answer, nor did he expect the persona to question him or even to experience such a thought. The other personas within him, with Arsene being the exception, remained constantly quiet, always a presence, but never human-like. It was surreal, staring down at something monstrous and having it ask questions.

Justine, or maybe Caroline, clears her throat. "As we were saying, in order to promote the progress of your rehabilitation, I believe it is necessary to offer you an additional facility within this place."

"Huh." Caroline huffs, "It's rare to see you smiling, Justine." She says with her own smile still in place.

Justine turns away from him and towards the other warden, "You are the smiling one, Justine, did
something happen to make you so joyful?"

"Me?" She crows back. "I'm just... pleased, is all. With the inmate for completing his duty. That's all."

Justine nods back at the other warden, "Agreed. The inmate's progress thus far is quite impressive, perhaps he truly is worthy of our master's praise."

Caroline nods as well, mirroring the other, before turning back to him. "A-ahem, anyways, inmate..." She trails off. Justine turns to him as well and, like Caroline had done moments ago, picks up where the other had left off, "If you have the will to continue your penal labor, we will allow you greater freedom from within this prison. It will be a deal between us, the wardens, and you, the prisoner."

"It's going to be hard work from here on out, inmate!" Caroline barks from Justine's side.

"Are we in agreement?" Justine questions softly.

Hard work? Akira couldn't help but question. Everything, from gathering Jack Frost to getting into Madarame's locked room, had taken almost everything he had, even with the phantom thieves at his side. Igor's words struck back at him. He'd need others, to forge bonds, to avoid the nameless ruin and his still-mysterious imprisonment.

It felt almost like cheating, having them ask this of him. He hadn't been the one to reach out to either Justine or Caroline, yet they wanted to forge a deal with him, to be connected in the same way the others were.

Akira nods, slowly at first, then more firmly. He didn't have much of a choice, if Igor's warnings were to believed; he had no idea how much time he had to complete his rehabilitation or to escape the coming ruin, and he'd need the wardens help if he were to fix either situation.

The wardens, without looking at each other, nod in synchronization.

A sudden elation sparks through his core. Warmth seems to blaze through his blood for a moment, a feeling he'd had before with Sakamoto and Iwai. He knew, without activating his thief vision, that there would be a new cord connecting him with the wardens in front of him.

"Now, inmate," Justine commands, "Call forth two others personas and we will demonstrate the use of your reward."

Akira does as he's told, drawing into himself once more, pushing past the chill and new warmth, to feel the pull of his personas. One appears, standing tall with wings and dark skin, coated in blue flame just as Jack Frost was. Her mouth is covered with dark bindings, so she says nothing. The other, like the previous, has wings that expand to either wall of the cell, crowding it further.

Justine's eye flashes blue, then one by one, the three personas he'd summoned were blinked from his side of the cell to the other.

"Prepare the execution, Caroline." Justine orders softly.

Execution? Akira feels his stomach sink low. He'd only seen the process once before and the process had nearly made him sick. Akira turns away from the wardens and stares back at the cell's only furniture, a bed, and tries his best to filter out the noises from beyond.

Covering his ears does nothing to silence the sound of the falling guillotines. The blades fall
swiftly, grinding against their frames, then crash heavily onto the ground below.

He tries his best not to imagine the scene behind him.

"This facility is called a triangle fusion, inmate, hence the need for three personas." Justine reveals. Her pen is scratching across paper once more. "The results are more varied and difficult to predict, but the new mask they forge for you will be much more powerful than the ones sacrificed."

"Assuming they accept you, of course!" Caroline jeers, sounding close. "And you can turn around now, inmate, the show's over."

Akira does as he's told, slowly shifting until he's facing the cell door once more. Caroline and Justine are standing just beyond it, both turned towards him with glowing, golden eyes. Both of their smiles are gone.

Beyond them, a figure is sheathed in blue fire, glowing brightly among the prisons dim walls. Its- he's not sure if its a male or female, but it's definitely not human- wings, made of fanning red feathers, spread wide over the chamber just outside of his cell. Its bird-like body sways slowly in the air just above Igor's desk, while its tail feathers dust against the darkened wood.

The persona stares down at him, its eyes seeming unnaturally still as it bobs through the air. Its eyes are beady and black, but quite large, and seem to glow blue under the light of the Velvet Room.

Its hums call out, sounding like birds he might hear back home, and echo through the chambers and off the walls. It makes the hairs on his neck stand on end and makes his ears vibrate harshly. The chirping stops, drawing his attention to the sound of its wings beating heavily against the air as it swoops down towards him.

Akira flinches backwards, unprepared and unequipped for a fight, and falls back onto the floor. He watches as the massive bird flies straight towards him.

The cage's door, which would have stopped a normal bird, does nothing to impede the persona's flight. He's not sure what exactly happens, as his vision fills with blindingly red feathers as the bird seems to phase through the cell door and straight into him.

Justine's mouth opens to say something, but he doesn't hear anything she says over the voice that sound suddenly in his head.

"I am thou. I am Phoenix. Thou art I. Thou art my master. For now." A new voice says, sounding neither like a man or a woman, it's voice too choppy for him to make any distinctions.

Akira lets out a breath. Tightness seeps from his shoulders as the swelling panic dies down. The new persona- Pheonix- carves its way through his mind like a new river being forged, and finally settles. He waits for everything to turn quiet before he finally stands back up and faces his wardens.

"It seems to have accepted you." Justine observes.

Akira nods back in her direction, still feeling shaky.

"You must be stronger than I thought, inmate." Caroline comments, also unsmiling.

"Your next task will be..." Justine entreats, flipping through pages on her clipboard and finally
tears one off. It's a yellowed page, nearly identical to the one he'd been given last time, and folded into a crisp square. "Shiisaa. But, unlike our last request, this persona must have the aptitude for nuclear abilities."

_Nuclear?_ He doesn't get the chance to get question what that might mean before he's being thrown out of the Velvet Room, his consciousness, like a switch, flickers to a blank nothingness before he's able to recognize the shift.

Akira wakes up to the sound of rain and the smell of coffee. His stomach is warm- hot- and his bladder is painfully full. Above all of those things, he feels exhausted, like he hadn't slept at all.

He rolls to his side, sending Morgana toppling off of him as he slides over the edge of the bed; a sense of deju vu washes over him as he does this, and he finds himself adjusting to a non-existent weight around his ankle. His hands move easier than they feel they should and he nearly slaps himself in the face when he starts washing himself.

The water doesn't help ease the exhaustion, nor does it wash away the events he'd just- or maybe it had been hours ago- heard in the Velvet Room and in Madarame's palace, but he does feel slightly cleaner, which is a start.

Phoenix coos softly inside of him, startling him at first and making him look around the cafe's bathroom for a stray bird.

"Ugh." Arsene says simply, before fading back into a more muted presence.

Akira says nothing and doesn't reach out to either of them. Instead, he wipes his face dry and heads back upstairs.

Morgana's lower half is sticking out of his schoolbag, which hadn't made it onto the floor since yesterday. Small piles of money are scattered outside of the bag's entrance, making a mess on the bed and floor, but he sees even more still folded and crumpled inside of it. Bills that hadn't been there yesterday when they'd infiltrated Madarame's palace.

It was possible that he hadn't noticed it until Morgana had brought it to his attention, he hadn't had a reason to open the zipper aside from letting his teammate in and out.

Akira didn't notice a lot of things it seems.

Glancing towards the staircase, Akira approaches the bed and tugs Morgana out of the bag.

"H-hey!" The cat whines, which is muffled by the sound of money splashing down on the bed as he tips the bag over, alongside the multitude of notes is a folded up, yellowed piece of paper.

_Wow._ Is his first reaction. Panic sets in quickly though, chasing after his amazement.

Gesturing towards the money, he asks, "Where?" Before realizes what he's doing. Morgana stares back at him as he reaches towards his phone to reiterate his question.

His teammate smiles up at him, "From Madarame's palace, of course! While you three were dealing with the newbie, I took the liberty of acquiring the bounties the shadows dropped."

Madarame's money then. Or copies of it, at least. A lot of it at that.

Checking the time, Akira knew that they wouldn't have time to go through it all right now before he needed to catch the train, maybe even less if Sakura-san decided to come up here for some
reason. Instead, he hastily smoothed the stack into a single pile—which was still impressive to him—and shoved it under the bed with the rest of his contraband.

Akira made sure to check his bag once more, ensuring that there was enough room for both Morgana and his school things, before he tugged his shoes back on and reattached his suspenders and blazer.

During school, then lunch, he debated on texting Kitagawa-san and the others. The exhibit would be closing soon, and, if Morgana were to be believed, their opportunity would disappear just as quickly.

Logically, there was a balance to be maintained. Like Morgana had said, if he, and the other phantom thieves, showed up to school as tired looking as he thought he might, there was a possibility that they'd all be questioned and caught. On the other hand, the sooner that Madarame was dealt with, the sooner their lives would return to normal.

Kitagawa-san would leave, lodging at his school, surrounded by other artists. He'd quit being a phantom thief and might even forget that they existed at all. Madarame would confess his sins or—Akira shudders—the artist would turn into the thing Morgana had warned them about.

Akira would... What would he do? Madarame had all but presented himself in front of him, a coincidence that had sparked their investigation. It wasn't likely to happen again; especially if he quit falling asleep in public places.

There was still the ruin to worry about as well. A reckoning that was somehow related to the MetaVerse.

Akira returns to LeBlanc without speaking to either Takamaki or Sakamoto. He eats dinner—something he reminds himself to do—with Sakura-san standing on the other side of the counter, washes himself off at the bathhouse across the street, and returns to the attic, and to sleep with Morgana tinkering on the desk in the corner.

As soon as he wakes up, Akira grabs onto his cell phone, careful not to throw Morgana off like he'd done the morning before, and starts composing a message to his teammates, as well as Kitagawa-san.

"After school today?" He proposes, wondering if Morgana would have phrased it differently and, if so, how. Akira holds the device close, though, concealing it from the other.

"Works for me." Takamaki.

"I'll be like 30 minutes late. Don't start without me!" Sakamoto.

"Of course." Kitagawa-san, who had been added sometime in the two days since he'd joined their group without him noticing; the news came with a bit of relief, as he wouldn't need to talk to Kitagawa-san directly right after he'd gotten the artist thrown out of his home.

School passes quickly, things seemingly back to normal, with him being ignored; nobody stops him on his way down from the roof, no teachers offering him strange stories, and no teammates to share his time with, aside from Morgana, who disappears into his bag as soon as the final bell rings; Akira's not sure how the cat knows what time it is without seeing the time, but he appreciates the speed in which Morgana moves.

Mishima waves at him while he's exiting their shared class; Akira isn't sure why. He waves back as
well and the other boy smiles at him, which is also confusing, but not something he can dwell on, at least for now. Moving with the corridor's traffic, which makes him feel simultaneously too fast and too slow, Akira navigates away from Shujin and towards the station, doing his best to remain unnoticed as he finds his way towards Madarame's shack for the second time that week.

Akira leans against the wall across the street from Madarame's, pressing himself against the crumbling stone the same way he'd seen others do; it was meant to look casual, but it felt anything but. The wall's uneven texture was rough against his back and was probably scratching up his uniform, but he maintained it until Takamaki showed up. Kitagawa was following her, just like he had been the last time he'd seen them.

"Ryuji's still not here?" Takamaki questions, pushing herself onto the wall beside him.

Akira shakes his head.

She huffs, "Darn. I even wasted some time getting Yusuke another lunch."

_Yusuke?_ Akira parrots. Did they know a Yusuke?

"I can assure, Kurusu-san, Takamaki-san, there's never a waste on a second meal." Kitagawa starts.

_Oh._ He realizes, feeling rather stupid. Kitagawa's first name was Yusuke.

Takamaki sighs, turning towards him. Akira turns away, looking towards the shack. "He started sketching one of the displays at the mall. _Then_, after I finally got him to stop doing that, he started reading the ingredients on each one!" She informs him quietly.

"Maintaining a proper diet is imperative, especially if- as phantom thieves- we're to be doing-" Takamaki shushes him quickly, "Don't say it like that!"

"Like that?" Kitagawa echoes.

"Don't mention the Phantom Thieves out loud, someone could be listening or something." She instructs.

"I suppose so." Kitagawa agrees. "The legality of such activities seem quite questionable."

"Not to mention the stalker." Morgana forwards, leaping onto the ground.

"Stalker?"

"We don't know if she's actually suspicious about... what we're doing, but she has been following me around after school. I've seen her a few times at some of my photo-shoots. I'm pretty sure she fell asleep, though." Takamaki expands between sips of water.

"Photo-shoots?" Kitagawa plucks out, stepping closer.

"Oh, yeah." She says, "I model sometimes. Mostly for magazines my parents work with, nothing like, big."

"That's very commendable, Takamaki-san." Kitagawa praises, "I suppose I'll need to find employment as well."

"I thought you said you worked things out with your school?"

Kitagawa hums, "I did; they're offering me free room, but they're unable to offer me boarding until
next year."

"Aren't those the same thing, though?" Takamaki questions.

"I was under the same impression." Kitagawa admits. "Unfortunately, I'll be in charge of providing my own meals and supplies for the remainder of the year."

"But you're homeless!" Morgana rebuffs loudly.

"Homeless? Yes, I suppose so. Hence the need for employment." Kitagawa answers.

"Employment?" Another voice suddenly speaks up. "You lookin' for a job already?" Akira looks over, towards his teammates and finds Sakamoto walking towards them.

"Indeed." Kitagawa responds.

"I never thought about how expensive art stuff would be." Takamaki admits, "Not to mention cooking for yourself everyday." Akira had never thought about it either. Thinking back to when he'd been inside of Madarame's shack, and Kitagawa's studio, there'd been hundreds of brushes, paints, and other supplies he didn't know the name of. He had no idea how much any of that might cost.

"Also, Ryuji, where were you? You said you were only gonna be thirty minutes!"

"We ready?" Sakamoto proposes instead of answers, dropping to lean one shoulder against the wall hiding them from Madarame's shack. The blond has his phone in one hand and his school bag in the other.

"Ready!" Morgana confirms. Without warning, the air suddenly shifts, gathering weight. The sunlight that had been warming his skin is abruptly cut off, leaving him shivering slightly in the confines of his extending clothes.

Beside him, his teammates stand in their changed outfits, Kitagawa is among them and Akira gets his first look at the artist's reflection of rebellion; a white mask hung over most of the tall teen's face, not unlike Takamaki's, concealing everything but his strangely blue eyes. It was painted on with red ink that seemed to contract and expand oddly, but formed the straight, sharp lines-excluding the curled mounds at the top which formed ears-of a fox's face. A high-collared jacket covered most of the artist's neck in white material, but hung open, unzipped down the majority of his chest, exposing sunken pale skin that seemed to shine against the dark color that the jacket faded into. A striped cloth hung under Kitagawa's waist, resembling an obi belt that Madarame's shadow had worn, only darker, which led to an animal's tail that hung from his backside; it was white with a bright red ribbon twisting towards it end. The appendage seemed to sway back and forth, despite the lack of wind and Kitagawa's stillness.

The artist looked quite odd is what Akira thought of the other. Which is something that could be said for him as well, or any of them.

"Oh, yeah." Morgana says suddenly, stepping in front of the artist. The cat, even in this form, was only as tall as Kitagawa's bright white boots. "We haven't decided on the newbie's code name yet!"

"Code name?" Kitagawa questions, but is drowned out by Panther's proclamation. "It has to be Kitsune! With the mask and everything."

"Hell yeah!" Skull agrees, "That really leaves an impression."
"Oh, are you two talking about me?" Kitagawa resumes, pushing back his mask.

"Er, I guess I didn't explain that part either." Panther admits with a laugh, "Remember how I told you not to mention being a phantom thief, when we're in public? Well, Morgana said that, when we enter palaces, we're going into their unconscious-" Mona interrupts, "Subconscious, Panther."

"Right..." She stumbles, "Since the palace is the subconscious of that person, they'll be able to like, hear us, or be aware of things we say and do. So anyways, we use code names so they don't get suspicious about who the Phantom Thieves of Hearts are. Does that make sense?"

Kitagawa nods, "Many artists do the same to avoid negative criticism on their more controversial pieces."

"D'you gotta suggestions for yours, then?" Skull asks, drawing forward until they've formed a small circle.

"Hm." Kitagawa hums slowly. "I'd say 'Da Vinci'."

*Da Vinci?* Akira questions silently. Arsene huffs quietly, his presence feeling offended- or something similar- but comments nothing, which leaves him feeling confused.

"Da Vinci? Like that one artist?" Panther clarifies.

"Indeed." Kitagawa says.

"Uh, nope." Skull shoots down.

"Then I have no other suggestions." Kitagawa concedes.

"Well, you've got that mask, like Panther said, and the weird tail-thingy." Skull critiques. The blond snaps his fingers together and declares, "I got it! You'll be 'Abura-age'!"

*Tofu?* Akira's uncertain how the name came to be. Morgana sniffs at the suggestion.

"Very well." Kitagawa agrees.

"What!?" Panther exclaims loudly. "Nuh-uh. No-no-no! You are not naming him after a food."

Skull groans, "Why not? He looks like a walking festival!"

Panther turns to him suddenly. "Joker's the leader, he should decide!" She proclaims, suddenly dragging him into the conversation.

Neither sign would be easy for him, and it seemed that Kitagawa didn't have much preference, so Akira was left unsure what to choose.

"What about Fox?" Mona suggests, tugging on Kitagawa's tail.

"It's a little on the nose, don't you think, Mona?" Panther questions doubtfully. Skull nods, "It's not as cool as Kitsune, either."

"We're not here to be cool!" Mona chides before turning towards him, just as Takamaki had. "What do you think, Joker? Fox or should we just call him 'Tofu Boy'?"

"It's fried tofu!" Skull interjects, "Fried!"
Fox, unlike the other suggestions, would be easy to sign—though he doubted that Morgana knew that—and sounded similar enough to the other phantom thieves' nicknames, except for maybe his own, to not sound unusual in the palace's cognition; he assumes so at least.

"Fox." Akira nods, signing; looping his dark-red fingers close to his nose then tugging outward.

"Is that how you say Abura-age?" Skull questions, mimicking him.

"It's obviously Kitsune." Panther observes.

Akira drops his hand away from his face, then shakes his head.

"Fox then?" Morgana queries. Akira nods quickly. He has his phone, he's not sure why he doesn't use it.

"Fox then." Panther repeats. "I guess that's okay."

"Yeah, I guess." Skull concedes as well. "It'll be less confusing anyways."

Morgana turns away from him, "Welcome to the team, Fox." He greets, bowing slightly.

"Fox?" Kitagawa hums. "Franz Marc once described them as fierce and fiery."

"Kind of ironic, huh?" Panther admits with a laugh.

"Yes, I concur, Takamaki—um, what should I refer to you all as, since I'm now The Fox." The artist questions, tugging at his own tail.

"Skull—obviously." Panther introduces, pointing towards the blond. "I'm Panther; then Mona, and finally, Joker." She says, gesturing towards him.

"Joker?" Kitagawa—Fox—questions.

"It's 'cause he can summon different personas." Skull explains for him.

"Fascinating..." Kitagawa stares directly at him. "When I... awoken to this power, it seemed as though I was unlocking another part of myself; becoming whole in a way I'd thought not possible until it occurred, but multiple? Your heart must be boundless."

Akira's not sure, exactly, what Fox is expressing, but the artist's direct attention and lessening distance between them makes his face warm and his palms sweaty; nobody—except for maybe Morgana—had looked at him so intensely and it was more than a little uncomfortable, especially since he had no idea what to say in response.

"I knew my intuition led me in the right direction. Though it wasn't your body calling out to me, but your very core!" Fox announces loudly. The artist was close enough that his voice hurt his ears.

"Anyways!" Skull interjects suddenly, tugging on Fox's shoulder. "We got shit to do, so stop bein' creepy and let's take this bitch down."

"Don't speak about-!" Fox cuts himself off, "Mayhaps you've a point. Our energies are being wasted—doubly so—by talking. I still owe sensei my life, but, as you say, Skull, this bitch need be taken down."

"Right..." Skull drawls. Behind him, Takamaki laughs.
Fox, despite being much taller than all of them, is just as agile and just as fast, keeping close to him as they finally navigate past the stony gate of Madarame's palace. The five of them rappel down from the skylight and into the galleries that had drawn Kitagawa's attention when they were retreating last time; now, the artist seemed ignore them, ducking past beams of light and seemingly to ignore their surroundings altogether.

As they advance, more guards seem to appear, the shadows lurking in places they hadn't the previous times they'd been through the same halls; they seemed to react to Kitagawa's presence more than their other teammates, taunting the artist, they also seemed to react more to his persona as well, their entire bodies frozen- and subsequently shattered- by Kitagawa's persona with apparent ease.

Akira led the others through the expanding corridor, like the last time he'd navigated through it, the opening doors seemed like they would never end, depicting the same mural repeatedly until finally, they were standing in an open area. The sign that had spoken of Madarame's security was still standing, but the laser grid that had been lying just beyond was absent, allowing them to walk through with ease.

A thought strikes him as he approaches the door that they'd risked a lot in opening. Never- not even once, he thinks- did he consider what might lie beyond; the treasure, obviously, was one of them, but he'd never considered anything but that. Any number of things could have been in that locked storage room. Akira is reminded of Kamoshida's own hidden room and the things that he'd seen in it. If he'd seen anything like that and not a bunch of identical- though harmless- paintings, would he have reacted as quickly to Morgana's distraction?

Part of him is doubtful. Kamoshida's secret had shocked him enough to make him sick, yet he hadn't even thought about the horrible things he might find snooping in Madarame's actual house. It was yet more proof that he wasn't a leader, certainly not one that Morgana envisioned him to be, that the Phantom Thieves would need.

"The security room's over there." Skull offers, standing close and pointing towards a small door he wouldn't have noticed otherwise, it was golden, just like the walls and everything else, and blended in because of it.

Akira nods towards his teammate and stalks forward. The security room's interior is exposed by a large window beside the unnoticeable door; peering inside, he sees a number of shadows and quickly ducks his head away from it before continuing forwards.

Past the security room is a large room, not unlike the one that Fox had awoken to his persona in. It's ceiling went straight upwards, gold turning into impenetrable darkness. A large statue stands tall in the center of the room, surrounded by sharp, golden staircases; unlike the previous statue, this one held a definite shape, a singular figure, but was entire golden like the previous one had been.

It was Madarame's likeness. As if magnified, the old artist stoops impossibly tall in front of them, completely golden where his face and skin had once been white; his yukata swoops around him, frozen and gilded.

"Sensei..." Fox whispers lowly, staring up at the statue. The artist turns away from the statue, so Akira does as well, leading the group up the stairs beside the statue.

The stairwell leads up to another open corridor. A rack stands to one side, the only piece of furniture in the unlit space.
"It's another map." Mona observes, plucking one from the lowest shelf and tugging it open. Akira kneels by his teammate and glances over his shoulder one way, then the other, before finally looking down at the unfolded map; it was different than the one in his pocket, as there was no entrance or exit.

"It says 'two out of two'." Mona points out, tapping at one corner of the parchment.

"So the treasure should be somewhere on this one then, Mona?" Panther questions, crouching next to the cat, who nods in response. "If I had to take a guess, it would be in the most secluded and heavily guarded area." His paw smooths over the paper slowly, then taps at one of the rooms on the map, a singular hallway that was the farthest from their current location.

"We'll need to pass through these other rooms to get to there, then." Fox rejoins, crouching beside him. "But there, up ahead, these areas-" Blue fingers cut across gaps in the map, "Seemed to be closed off. We'll need to find a way to open them."

"Or a way around." Panther voices, her own gloves joining on the parchment to navigate a path. "If we go around..." She flips the map over suddenly, then back again, "There's no stairs though!"

"Stairs?" Skull questions. Takamaki nods, blonde hair flopping over the map. "See, where Mona pointed out, there should be stairs that lead into this hallway, right before that last room, but there's no other stairs leading up there."

"Maybe the map is all fucky." Skull suggests, sweeping his hand at the map.

"That does make some sense." Mona concedes, "There's no customers up here, so maybe the map isn't accurate. It's also possible that palace has grown since the map was made."

"Grow?" Panther questions.

Mona nods, "Some parts of the palace form before other parts. It's like in Mementos, how some shadows have their own miniature palaces before they form into actual ones; if the distortion were to grow stronger over time, other parts of the palace might not match up. For example, if Madarame's desires were to sudden shift in one direction, the outer parts of the palace would mirror them, but the parts of the palace that were already formed wouldn't change at all."

"So if Madarame stopped liking gold so much, the top floor wouldn't be gold then?" Skull replies.

Morgana nods, "That's exactly right."

"You seem very knowledgeable about the ongoings of sensei's heart, Mona." Kitagawa states.

"All palaces, not just Madarame's, stem from the same thing: twisted desires, and they tend to respond similarly." The cat explains, "At least from what I remember, anyway..."

Mona pulls the map out from under their teammates' hands and folds it up before handing it to him. Akira slides it into his pocket along side the other map. Silently, they continue, sneaking past the sealed doorways and into a dimly lit hallway; one path is cut off with a set of lasers, beams of red piercing through the walkway from almost every angle. It would be impossible to slide under or jump over the trap. The opposite way opened up into a large gallery that was sectioned off with golden partitions and sets of laser traps between them, which would make navigation difficult, but not impossible.

Slowly, Akira ducks under one set, then takes cover near a wall, hearing the sound of unfamiliar footsteps. Seconds later, a guard passes by without noticing him or his teammates. Leading through
the rest of the room is much of same, but the other end doesn't have a door or even a vent. Akira leads them back through, doing his best to avoid the guards, yet nothing comes of it; the maze-like room has nothing in it.

With a sigh, Akira presses himself against the wall to avoid detection from an approaching shadow, but he either misjudged the distance between himself and the wall or the wall disappeared, as Akira finds himself falling. He hits the ground just as Madarame's voice starts calling out; he'd just gotten them caught!

"How dare you trample onto my tranquil bamboo garden with those grimy feet! You shall not leave here alive!" The artist threatens from everywhere at once.

_Bamboo garden?_ He thinks, dazed.

"Was that Madarame?" Skull questions. Mona hums, "I think it was just one of his thoughts, he doesn't seem to be around anywhere."

Akira opens his eyes and finds himself staring out into the room he'd just been in.

"I'm... inside of a painting." Fox reveals. The artist's arms whip out, nearly smacking both Panther and Skull with them as he spins.

"Watch it!" Skull warns, leaning down in front of him. The blond extends a hand and Akira finds himself being pulled to his feet when he takes it. "Magic paintings, huh?" The other boy drawls from beside him, then snorts, his exposed lips slowly stretch into a smile. "I mean, nice find, but you totally busted ass, dude!"

Sakamoto laughs at him.

"We should continue." Mona advises. "It looks like this painting has a path, it might lead closer to the treasure." Akira follows his teammate's gaze, past a wave of bamboo stalks, which seem to sway without wind, and spots the path the other had mentioned; the path ends in a wave of fog that doesn't seem to end, when he pushes his hand in it, there's nothing solid behind it, yet when he walks through it, another landscape is just beyond it, looking the same as the place they'd just come from. Tall mountains, round and brown stand at eye level, bamboo shoots taper impossibly upwards, and a path continues leading them forwards. Akira follows it, unsure what other options were open to them at this point.

The path ends abruptly with no more fog to walk through. Outside of the painting, though Akira's not sure how it's possible, is a ledge, one that overlooks the gallery they'd just been lost in.

Stepping forward, Akira feels himself being ripped away from the painting, a sensation that's similar to entering the MetaVerse, though not as extreme, washes over him as he steps onto the ledge.

"Woah!" Panther whispers. "We didn't just walk through one painting! Look, there's a bunch of them- we started down there and we ended up here."

"I wonder if all the paintings are like that." Mona says quietly.

"That was not how I imagined walking through a painting would be." Fox informs, stepping out of the canvas. Skull is just behind him, "You've thought about walking in paintings before?"

"Of course." The artist says; Sakamoto mimics him, pulling a face. "I thought everyone held the desire to walk, at least once, through a painting."
Fox continues talking, Akira's not exactly sure what the other boy is saying, as they sneak along
the edge of the oddly positioned balcony- the only way in or out is either through the painting
they'd just stepped out of or a small vent in the opposite corner- his voice echoes through the small
vent's passage, though he can only make out a few words at a time over the sound of the metal
around them creaking and groaning noisily under their weight and movement.

The shaft leads into an open room that splits into two paths. One door is locked from the inside-
where they're currently standing- and is quickly unlocked with a push of a nearby button. It opens
to reveal the path they'd already taken. The gates that were blocking the walkways, as well as the
lasers, were deactivated.

"A shortcut!" Panther exclaims then, more quietly, "This place is designed so weird."

Turning back around, Akira starts headed towards the other walkway, but stops in his tracks when
a shadow drops into view; it's entire form seems to pulse with uncomfortable energy, but it doesn't
seem to take notice of them at all.

"Careful!" Skull says, tugging on his shoulder. "Panther and I saw that kinda shadow when we
were openin' the security room."

"So you think it's guarding something important then?" Mona questions.

"It's posture would indicate as such." Fox comments from behind. "Something important must lay
beyond him."

"The last one was a real pain in the ass." Skull recounts. "But it should be pretty easy with all five
of us."

Mona steps forward, "Just remember to stay coordinated. We'll only end up hurting ourselves if we
end up tripping over each other."

Akira nods back at his teammate, who unsheathes his sword.

"Halt!" The guard commands with a growl. "This area is strictly off-limits for customers under
Lord Madarame's orders!"

"Customers?" Fox questions quietly. Skull stomps his foot, leaning into the guard's masked face.
"We ain't customers, now get outta the way!"

The guard's form shudders and shimmers like liquid and remains standing until it finally explodes,
sending bits of its ruined clothing around as it expands suddenly. The shadow stretches tall and
brightly white, its pointed head, which is made of paper, brushes against the museum's ceiling; the
thing stares down at all of them, somehow alive despite being nothing more than paper.

Its hand sweeps forward, sounding like paper flapping in the wind, and shoots out a red smoke
from its folded fingers. Akira manages to dodge it, pushing himself backwards as he concentrates
on summoning a persona. Skull and Fox, however, aren't fast enough to evade the attack and start
to cough as they inhale the oddly colored smoke.

Both boys recover quickly, then, in sync, they dash forward with their weapons drawn and nearly
kill the other as they swing at the shadow; both of their weapons gleam over each other's heads,
somehow avoiding colliding or injuring one another.

All the same, Akira feels his stomach start to drop and calls forth Arsene. His other half sparks to
life behind him and with a snap, bolts of blackened fire shoot towards the shadow's form, the
attacks catch onto the edge of the enemy's torso, far above either Fox's or Skull's reach.

The two weapons swing forwards again, once again nearly colliding and hitting the other as they attack the same leg.

"Be careful!" Panther shouts over the roar of flame and steel. "Ryuji!" She hollers.

"It's no good, Panther, whatever they got hit with is making them go berserk!" Mona yells back at her.

The incident in Mementos springs back to mind and Akira's unsure what to do about it; the faster they took down the shadow the better, but the constant onslaught from Skull and Fox doesn't seem to be doing anything. The shadow doesn't even seem to notice them there.

Takamaki shoots another ball of fire at the shadow's mid-section, which burns through it, revealing the wall beyond it and nothing else.

"Try aiming for the head!" Mona orders. Flame flickers through the air brightly, spluttering, smoldering ash rains down from the shadow's face, but it still remains standing, and reels back its fist once again, the same red smoke from before materializes from nothing and shoots towards them.

Once again, the three of them manage to duck away from the attack.

Akira sighs deeply, trying to maintain control as he sinks within himself once more. Pheonix answers his call, thundering to life as Arsene sinks back into him. The massive bird floats above him, creating gusts of wind that make his hair and clothes rustle constantly. A chill breaks out across his skin as he orders his persona forward.

A massive well of flame builds up, creating a blinding light that suddenly shoots forward. Takamaki's own flame flies with it and, together, the energy spears forward, colliding with the shadow's form and toppling it over; Akira rushes forward and Phoenix follows, trilling above him.

_Apologies_. Akira orders- pleads- both of himself and his persona. He manages to grab onto Kitagawa's tail and yanks the artist back as hard as he can, hoping that the accessory was sturdy.

He doesn't manage to reach Skull, who's suddenly lost behind a blinding white light. His eyes are forced closed and Akira's unsure if the other boy is alright, if he, himself, is alright.

"Ryuji?" Panther calls out. Her voice is painful to hear past the ringing in his ears, her form hard to look towards when his eyes burn, but the blonde appears in front of him and rushes past him.

Kitagawa holds him up, the artist's bright blue gloves peering into his vision from underneath his arms; somehow, in protecting him, he'd managed to fall into the other's arms.

"Ryuji!?" Calls out again. Akira pushes his feet under himself. They feel wobbly, but he manages to step forward, where Panther is kneeling beside Skull's crouched form, his arms are wrapped around his knees, with his head tucked low between them.

"I'm not dead, am I?" Skull's voice comes out from his balled up form. Takamaki shoves him, making him fall over. "What the hell!" Skull shouts, his mask is missing from his face and is, instead, on the floor several meters away, gleaming brightly on the floor; Akira moves forward to retrieve it.

"You and Yusuke went totally berserk and nearly took each other's head off!" Panther shouts. It
sounds like she hits him again, though Akira isn't sure. "Why are you guys so stupid!"

"We got 'em, didn't we?" Skull snaps. "An' h-hey, quit hitting me or I'm actually gonna die- or at least hit him too!"

"Ugh." Panther groans. Akira bends down and scoops up Skull's mask. It's surprisingly heavy. Twisting it around in his hands, he delivers it back to the other boy, who smiles up at him, bare-faced.

"Thanks, I was wonderin' where this thing flew off to."

Fox steps forward, "What happened just now?" The artist questions, looking towards Takamaki.

"You two seemed to be hit with some kind of mind-altering spell of some sort." Mona explains, "You both rushed towards the shadow and started attacking it."

"Damnit!" Skull seethes, punching down at the tiles under him. "I lost control again!?!" Suddenly the blond is looking directly at him. "I didn't do nothin' right?!"

Akira shakes his head quickly. It was the right response, yet he felt like he should say something more- something a leader might- to quell the blond's frustration.

"That's somethin', I guess." Skull mutters quietly, finally pushing himself to his feet.

"And then what happened?" Fox questions. Panther sighs, "Then Akira- er, Joker, brought out another persona, and we blew up the shadow, somehow."

"Blew it up?" The artist questions at the same time Skull does, "Forreal?"

"Uh-huh." She confirms, "Why do you think I was worried about you two idiots? That explosion was huge, I thought I was gonna get hurt by it, but Joker managed to pull you back, I'm not sure how all of you ended up uninjured."

"We won't always be as lucky." Mona intimates softly. "You all need to be more careful!"

"Maybe we should go home for today?" Panther suggests, pushing her mask away.

"But the treasure is so close! I can smell it just beyond that room!" The cat exclaims, pointing towards the door the shadow had been standing in front of.

*Is it really so close?* Akira can't help but wonder. He felt drained, yet knowing the end was close excited him.

**Chapter End Notes**

I've decided to make this a monthly-updated project until I can find more time to devote to it. I hope you all don't mind; I've tried my best to keep it on a weekly basis so people don't forget what the last chapter was about before the next one comes out, but I've been quite busy, unfortunately. Thank you all for your continued patience.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I also updated on September 30th, during AkiRyu week. I got lost in the sea of fluff so if you didn't read the last chapter, be sure to do that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 29

Akira steps forward, taking in a deep breath, and tries to attune to the same sense that Morgana seemed to have; he expands his presence, trying to see the treasure that the other assured was close. He felt something, but he couldn't tell if it was the treasure. Everything seemed to radiate with energy, reaching out to him, other things radiated with a iciness, wanting to hide; he couldn't remember which feeling Kamoshida's treasure had.

What calls him forward feels like another presence, not dissimilar to a persona, but different somehow. Inexplicably so. Kneeling down, Akira swipes away the ashes of the shadow they'd just destroyed and wraps his fingers around a thin object.

Bringing it closer to his face, the thing- definitely not Madarame's treasure- is about as large as a playing card, only made of some type of glass. When he lifts it up, he can see through it, but everything on the other side is wavy and distorted. Aside from the unusual- but unreadable- script on either side of it, it's unremarkable in almost every way. Yet it thrums with something- energy, magic, the MetaVerse itself, he doesn't have a clue- and it calls out to him.

Carefully, Akira tucks the thing into his pocket, along with the slightly burnt money that the shadow had dropped.

"Nothin' good, huh?" Skull says from in front of him. The blond is bent over, the silver of his mask level with Akira's own. "You got a weird look on your face, 's how I figured."

Akira shrugs and pushes himself to his feet- ignoring how much energy it seems to take. The others are already ahead of him, with Panther and Mona peering into the windowed wall the shadow had been standing in front of. Fox is standing of to the side, peering down a hallway they hadn't been down before. The artist's mouth is moving quickly, making his mask sway slightly, but Akira can't make out what he's saying.

"Come on." Skull says, speeding up to walk in front of him. "There should be a button to open the door. Or that's how it was with the other one."

He follows after his teammate. Like the blond had said, the door slid open with a simple button press. The room in front of them was golden like every other, but had numerous screens on the walls and tables, revealing other golden rooms they'd been in, as well as some that Akira can't remember seeing before.

Skull stalks forward and drops down into a chair in front of one of the desks.

"Oh wow." Panther says, drawing his attention towards the door as she steps through it. "D'you
think the treasure will show up on one of these monitors?" She steps further into the room, her gaze filters through each of the screens.

"It's quite likely." Mona answers, stepping inside as well.

Akira glances out of the security room windows. Fox is still standing in the walkway. The artist's back is facing towards him, but Akira can still see the ears on his mask rising and falling.

*What is he doing?* He can't help but wonder. Something about this didn't feel right. Aside from the other boy's odd behavior, him being alone, especially after only just awakening his persona- not that Akira had that much more time to adjust- gave him the impression that something bad was going to happen.

Skull rolls towards him on the chair he'd sat down into and tugs on his arm. "Did you have to use a password when you disabled that trap thing the other day? 'Cause when we got through the door thing there was only a switch thing to keep the door opened."

He nods.

"D'you remember it? 'Cause this thing needs a password." A yellow thumb jerks towards one of the monitors that was no longer displaying a camera feed but instead a familiar looking prompt.

**Enter Password**

Akira steps forward to type it in, but taps on his teammate's shoulder to draw his attention away from the screen.

"Huh?" The blond says, perhaps too loudly.

He points towards the window, towards Fox out in the hall. Skull stands, abandoning the rolling chair to follows his gaze.

"Oh him? What about it?" The other asks.

A swell of shame makes his stagger for a moment, a spark of the forbidden runs through him as he gestures towards his own eyes then back at their newest member.

"Keep an eye on him." Akira says, feeling embarrassed- not only for asking but for signing when he shouldn't. It reminded him of back on the school roof, when started ranting without meaning to and how relieved he felt afterwards, even if the people in front of him couldn't understand him.

"Watch him? You got it." Skull complies quickly, as if Akira had any real power over him. The blond quickly exits the room, the security room door sliding shut behind him, and Akira feels rather accomplished- almost like a leader- but slightly dreadful.

If something happened now, not only would Fox be injured, but Skull was at risk as well.

Quickly, he settles in front of the computer and types in the number sequence from before. Nothing happened; nothing disables or opens up, but no alarms go off either. Akira types it in again. The same thing- nothing- happens. Moving slowly, he navigates each digit in the password, double-checking himself before pressing enter for the third time.

Nothing happens.

*Did it change?* He questions silently. A wave of sweet slithers down his back.
The password not working could mean any number of things. They might have to leave the palace and engage with Madarame in the real world once again. Or they might have to look around for clues inside of the MetaVerse, a switch or another powerful shadow, maybe even a mix of the two.

Sucking in a deep breath, Akira feels a pressure form over his eyes as the security room turns into dark shades of blue. The computer screen in front of him glows brightly, but doesn't grab his attention. Speckles of bright light in the shape of fingerprints create a sheen over the keyboard just below it, but all of the keys are highlighted, offering no clues as to what keys to press or what the password might be.

Nothing else in the room draws his attention. With his head throbbing, Akira drops the thief vision, letting the world sink back into shining gold.

Akira glances towards Panther and Mona, both of them are looking towards the numerous monitors and he's not sure how to interject to inform them of his failure.

He walks out of the security room with the need to be alone, but Skull and Fox are just outside of the door and match pace with him as soon as he walks through it.

"Did it work?" Skull questions to his right, the blond's arm falls over his shoulder again and Akira finds himself feeling crowded by the added weight.

The question, for reasons he can't grasp, makes him stop walking and he looks down at his feet, at the disintegrated form of the shadow guard licking at his boots, stirred up by his attempt at escaping. Akira shakes his head another moment later, feeling uncomfortable; they were standing on a corpse and yet his teammate's eyes seemed latched onto him instead.

"It didn't work?" The blond rephrases, his voice flatter than before. Golden light reflects off the other's mask, making him look even further away from the man all but hanging off of him.

He's let Skull down, and Fox, too, who they- he'd- had gotten kicked from his home to get past Madarame's other defenses.

*We're in over our heads.* Akira thinks, not for the first time, but definitely with the most finality he'd ever felt since discovering the MetaVerse. It would be unlikely, if not impossible, to get close enough to Madarame to get a clue as to what the next password might be, if it even came up at all. The shadow that was guarding the password, if something like that even existed, would be more powerful than the last and Akira's not sure if the five of them could handle it without more of them on the brink of death.

"That's some shit." Skull responds, nodding vaguely. "What do you think we should do? Look around that room again? Steal Madarame's phone or something?"

"That wouldn't be a wise course of action." Fox speaks up from behind them. Skull releases him to turn to their teammate and Akira shuffles around to do the same.

"Why's that?" Skull scoffs suddenly, "He probably can't even work a phone, so that's probably out. Dude's gotta be like, eighty or something, right?"

Fox crosses his arms, "Madarame is actually quite adept with technology, not that he'd ever show as much in public..." The artist trails off, then clears his throat, "Actually, he's contacted a private security company to have us all detained for trespassing and intends to pursue legal action against all of us. Morgana excluded, of course."

*Legal action.* Akira feels his heart seize in his chest at the other's words.
Skull chokes, "How do you know that?" He crows.

Fox's tail swishes to the side, but the artist remains entirely still as he explains, "Sensei contacted me this morning. Informing me that I was no longer welcome, that I was no longer his pupil, and that he intended to see us all jailed for what we saw the other day."

"W-what did you guys see behind that door?" Skull stammers out.

"The Sayuri, the infamous stolen painting." Fox answers steadily. "The entire room was filled with counterfeits as well. Sensei- Madarame- he sold them for profit. A way to satiate his greed, to make this," The taller boy throws his arms out wide, gesturing to the room around them, "Into a reality."

"Guess that means we gotta find this treasure fast then, before more of those things get sold." Skull suggests.

Fox doesn't say anything else. Skull walks up to the artist and drops a hand on his shoulder, just like he'd done to Akira a few times.

"And uh," His teammate says quietly, "Sorry about all that shit. I know what're you're goin' through, well, not exactly, but like, we're here for you, dude." Yellow gloves clap down on the artist's taller shoulders a few times before Skull backs away from the other.

"Thank you, I believe that's the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me." Fox answers.

"Er, right." Skull backs away another step and turns towards him suddenly. The blond's face glows red as he talks towards him, "Let's go look for this password thing, yeah?"

Akira follows the other two as they head back towards the control room.

"What's going on?" Panther questions as the three of them walk through the sliding door.

"Password ain't workin'." Skull explains, dropping down into the chair in front of the still glowing computer. He searches through the desk, lifting up papers and folders, presumably looking for the password.

"Do you think it'd be in here somewhere?" She questions next.

Skull shrugs and continues snooping through the contents of the desk in front of him.

"Do you think it might be like that door then? Do we have to go back to the shack?" Panther questions.

"I don't think so, Panther." Morgana jumps in. "There aren't any other rooms that a password could be locked behind, if anything, it'd be something that Madarame himself thought of."

"But Madarame said he had another house, though." Panther counters.

"Oh yeah!" Skull blurts. "Didn't he say he had a mistress or something?"

"Could it be possible, Morgana?" Panther asks.

Morgana shakes his head, "I don't think so. The palace's manifestation relies on real-world cognition, so the palace defenses are entirely based on that shack and his perceptions around it. I think, if anything, the password would be something related to that; not to mention, it's part of Madarame's subconscious, so his desires might have an affect on something like this."
"Something he desires in that shack...?" Skull echoes.

"What about Kitagawa, er, Fox, I mean." Panther suggests.

"Gross." Both Skull and Mona groan.

"Talent." Fox suggests next.

"Ooh, burn." Panther laughs, "I doubt the password would be a name anyways."

"What about that Sayuri thing you said earlier?" Skull entreats, jerking up in his seat as if the suggestion hit him physically.

"The Sayuri? You mean that painting that went missing?" Panther questions, then exclaims, "That could be it! Maybe he wants to make something as successful as the Sayuri again. That could be his desire!"

"Let's try it." Skull amends, pulling the keyboard in front of him. "Uh, nope." He says a moment later.

"Hm." Mona hops onto the desk in front of him, "How did you get the password last time, Joker? Maybe we can do something similar?"

Tugging his phone from his coat pocket, Akira begins typing. He's grateful that his hands have something to do, but feels uncomfortable with the relentless staring of his teammates as he types out a reply.

"I overheard the shadows talking about the password." Akira explains, twisting the screen around for Morgana.

"Huh." Mona responds, tapping where his chin might be. "That makes sense."

"It does?" Skull questions incredulously.

"I'll try to put it in a way you can understand, Skull." Mona chastises. The cat turns to stick his tongue out at the blond before he begins, "Palaces are manifestations of desires, right? They also, for some reason, draw shadows into them. The shadows become corrupted by the ruler's influence somehow."

Panther interrupts, "So that's why the shadows in Kamoshida's palace were in armor and these guys are dressed as security guards?"

Mona nods, "Precisely."

"Oh." Skull says quietly, "I didn't really notice that until you just said it."

"Anyways." The cat stresses, "Since the shadows are corrupted by the palace's ruler, it makes sense that they'd know about the password."

"What're you implying, Mona?" Panther asks.

"I'm fairly certain that if we want to find the password, we need to find more shadows." He explains.

Skull sighs, "So they're kinda like mini-Madarame's."
"A depressing sentiment." Fox laments, "Though, with that perspective, the thought of attacking those creatures weighs less heavily on my conscious."

"That's uh... Good." Skull observes, "I think."

"Should we go to the other security room then?" Panther suggests.

"I think we might be looking for a specific shadow." Mona contradicts.

"Like the one guarding the door?" Skull questions before turning towards him. "Hey, didn't that shadow drop something earlier? Maybe it was a clue on how to find the password or something?"

Akira reaches into his coat once more and searches for the oddly shaped card. It tingles when his fingers brush against it and he feels the same feeling from earlier of something persona-like, but he's still unsure how to describe it.

The glass filters the light from the control room and glows in a myriad of colors from the countless monitors. He hands it over to Skull, who almost drops it when it touches him, and Akira watches as the other twists and turns it in his hands, searching it's transparent edges for something password-related.

Eventually, the other boy hands it back to him. "Hm, maybe it means something to Madarame? Like the necklace that one shadow dropped or something."

Akira shrugs. He's not sure what to make of anything and he's starting to unravel; they'd spent a few hours in the MetaVerse already, not to mention the stressful factors outside of the MetaVerse that weighed down on their group.

"Maybe we should camp out in the hallway for a bit, a shadow that knows the password will probably end up coming up here when he notices his buddy is gone." Skull suggests while taking to his feet.

"Should we split up then?" Fox suggests. "We'd be able to eavesdrop on multiple versions of Madarame if we worked separately."

"I dunno." Panther drawls. Her hand slides against her stomach where she'd been stabbed. The wound was no longer there, but he can still remember what it felt like to be able to look through someone's chest. "You're still pretty new at this, Fox, I think we should all stick together, just in case something happens again, like with that other shadow."

"I suppose so." Fox concedes.

Akira leads them back out of the security room and back in the direction of the other security room, hoping that no shadows would show up but praying for this password all the same.

When they sneak past the first security room, Akira feels slightly dizzy, but pushes ahead, circling around the second floor until someone tugs him out of his next step and behind a corner.

"Look!" Panther says from nearby. Pink fingers point down the hallway, to a place they hadn't explored yet. Down the corridor, two shadow guards were hunched close together. They didn't have faces, but their heads shook and their hands waved, giving Akira the impression that they were talking to each other, even without mouths.

"Let's get closer." Panther suggests, all too close. Akira shudders silently, but complies, scooting along the wall as quietly as he can until they're all within reaching distance of both shadows. Akira
hides behind a vase that is both wide and tall. Two shoots of bamboo jut out of the dirt, sprouting into a bundle of foliage that blocks his view of the shadows. Morgana and Panther are tucked in beside him, hidden from the shadow's attention.

Directly across from them, Fox and Skull kneel behind a display case, it's glass top allow the other two to glance towards the pair of shadows.

Akira leans forward on his hands and tries to listen to the whispers of the shadows ahead. Their voices are deep but soft, making it difficult to catch each word over the sound of his teammates shuffling beside him.

"...Got past the... garden." One of the shadows says.

The other sighs loudly and answers in a similar sounding voice, "Yeah, I had to... the password for the..."

The first shadow leans in closer, the beam of its flashlight slides over where the three of them are hiding, but it doesn't seem to notice them. It makes his heart jump in his chest all the same and Akira leans closer still, trying to listen.

"What to?" It asks, "It better not be as simple as last time."

"Well," The other says, "I... some trouble coming up... For now, I... numbers for... Madarame's feet."

The light that had fallen on him disappears. Down the hall, Akira can see the guard rubbing at his head with its flashlight, looking disturbingly human. "Lord Madarame's feet?" It questions loudly.

Its partner doesn't answer and waves the other shadow off. "It doesn't matter." Akira catches, "Just get back to patrol, I'll tell you later." It instructs, already walking away and towards them.

Madarame's feet? Akira can't help but question. It was lucky they'd managed to catch the shadows when they did, but the clue didn't seem like much of a clue at all.

"Don't follow trails when you can cut across the gardens." Arsene says suddenly, making him jump.

"The numbers for Madarame's feet?" Panther asks as he takes to his feet.

Akira's unsure what to do next, but he's already standing, and already moving. If they kept listening to Madarame's other shadows, one of them might let the password slip eventually. On the other hand, they might not, continuing to share the same clue that they'd just overheard. Arsene was right, though, getting the password might be as simple as locating the source. In this case, it would be the shadow that had just walked past them.

Arsene flickers into being as soon as Akira calls into the void as if he'd been anticipating what Akira might do. A wave of blackened fire sweeps across the floor, catching around the guard's legs. The guard falls to the ground, its form dissolving into a group of shadows that all turn to face him.

"Are you crazy?" Panther whispers quite loudly before running over. Mona, Fox, and Skull run over as well after another moment, just as one of the shadows dashes forwards using its wings to propel without touching the ground. A scythe that's taller than the shadow wielding it fans outwards, revealing multiple blades that ripple with a dark energy, and streaks downwards from above him, making streaks of purple and pink in the air.
The scythe crashes down from above, but crash against something, creating a thunderous sound.

"Not this time!" Skull says, also from above. His arms are extended, yellow hands on either side of his pipe to block the still descending blades. They slide against each other as the blond falls downwards, back towards the ground, and create sparks that fizzle to the ground. The shadow's momentum, or maybe its strength, outmatches his teammate's quickly. The scythe's multiple blades sink into the black sleeves of Skull's jacket, creating tears in the material and in his flesh. Streams of dark blood well up over the penetrating blades and splash onto the ground below him.

"Goemon!" Fox enchants, making the museum's air chill over. Icy spears erupt from the ground, slowing down the other shadows as they fly towards them.

Akira sucks in a deep breath and reaches towards Arsene once again, sending the persona forward to match the scythe-wielding shadow. It snarls and hisses as his persona approaches from one side and Akira the other, revealing multiple rows of pointed teeth and a slithering, snake-like tongue that lashes violently in its mouth.

Arsene's wings stretch backwards slowly, before sending a massive gust of wind across the corridor. Ice flurries across the walkway, whiting out the golden floors of Madarame's museum. He lunges forward as well, sinking his blade into shadow's wing instead of its arm as it starts getting blown away. The sheer flesh of the wing shatters like broken glass, splintering outwards as his knife slides through it.

It screams and drops the grip on its scythe, which is all Akira can ask for as he fumbles with the gun in his non-dominant hand. The weapons- both his gun and the shadow's scythe- clatter to the floor and get buried in the snowy shards beneath them.

Before he can worry about the shadow lashing out again, Skull steps forward, readjusting his grip on his rod before it arcs widely through the air and connects solidly with the shadow's head.

It goes silent, then slowly sinks into nothing beneath the snow and ice.

Akira doesn't look for his other weapon and continues to command Arsene forward where the other shadows are being held off by his teammates. With the five of them, the others are destroyed, except for one.

Akira lifts his arms, holding Panther and Skull, who'd been standing beside him, back from delivering a final blow to the ground-bound shadow in front of them.

"Huh?" Skull questions, attempting to step past his arm once again. Akira drops his arm, but steps forward, faster than his teammate can, and blocks the shadow with his body, quickly pulling out his phone before anything else can happen.

"Password" Akira orders from the shadow. Both of its legs are broken, one charred and smoking, the other bent at an unusual angle. Akira tries not to look at them, nor at the pained expression on its face.

"Why I tell you?" It croaks out with the voice of an old woman.

He shakes the phone in the shadow's face, asking again. The light from his screen bounces over its face, revealing the odd, scaly texture of its green face. His message is reflected back at him in the dark, nearly-black shine of its widened eyes.

"No password!" It hisses back at him and tries to crawl away. Without thinking about it, Akira steps forward and places his foot on its chest; the shadow heaves against his boot and tries to claw
at him, but is too weak to fight back.

When it whimpers and sighs, Akira recognizes what he's doing is cruel, wrong in more ways than one, yet is something that he's already doing. The shadow would die soon, or become a part of him, but he needed that password.

"Password." Akira asks again, presenting his phone again.

The shadow sighs, closing its blackened eyes. It almost looks peaceful and Akira feels even more uncomfortable. "One-One-Two-Zero." It breathes slowly. "Sign at statue feet."

"Thank you." Akira says with his free hand, just as the shadow shifts forms yet again. The monster hadn't opened its eyes, and even if it did, he doubted that it would understand what he was saying, yet it soothed the fire under his skin telling him what he'd just done was wrong. Just beneath him, the shadow starts to fall apart, shifting into small beads of pale light that spill over like sand. It spreads into a puddle before suddenly bouncing upwards. The movement is fast enough to make Akira jump backwards, but the movement is useless as the puddle flies towards him. The light swirls like a river, blinding him as it flies right into his face and through him.

The shadow's presence builds up inside of him, as the stream of the shadow thins out, the more complete it starts feeling inside of him.

"Me remember my name now..." It says vaguely, with a soft, but deep voice. "Your sea... My soul... Save..."

Akira's not sure what to make of it. He's never acted that way before, not that he's had many chances to do so, yet... It felt like a door had been opened, one's that always been there, part of him just as much Arsene is. Morgana had said that the shadows weren't real, that nothing in the MetaVerse was, yet the guards and the shadows seemed and acted more human than Akira felt at the moment.

1120. The password's simplicity sits uncomfortably in his chest.

With a sigh, he stands, removing his feet from what remained of the shadow.

"That was kinda extreme, don't you think?" Panther comments quietly. Akira turns around and finds her standing closer than where he'd blocked them off. Her mask is pushed back again, revealing a frown.

"It did seem quite... brutal." Fox comments. The artist is standing off to the side, staring at one of the paintings adorning the golden wall. "Sometimes, however, if I've learned anything since becoming a phantom thief-"

"Wasn't that like yesterday?" Skull comments over the other.

"It's that if we're meant to redeem Madarame, it's sometimes necessary to match his cruelness." Fox finishes. The artist steps forward, tracing something on canvas with his fingers, his touch leaves behind trails of ice, highlighting his path, but Akira can't make out what the other is meant to be tracing. "Taking the high road has done nothing for any of us, if what Panther has told me holds true."

"S-still," Panther continues. "It's not their fault that Madarame is like this, it's cruel of us to take it out on them just to save time."

Mona steps forward, "I think Fox has a point, Panther. Being a phantom thief is about the greater
good, the faster we get rid of the palace's ruler, the less harm he or she will be doing in the real world."

She sighs, "I guess so. It just seems so real, so it feels wrong to just do that, you know?"

The cat nods slowly. "It's like Skull said, though, the shadows here are basically mini-Madarame's. They've been too corrupted to recognize themselves."

"Really?"

Mona nods, "Remember the shadows in the Mementos? Didn't you notice that they act differently than the ones we encounter inside of palaces?"

Panther shakes her head, then shrugs. "I don't think so."

"Mementos is where shadows originate, where they exist in their purest forms. But when they enter a palace, they become extensions of the palace's ruler, forgetting what they were before." Mona explains.

"That makes sense," Panther nods. Skull jumps in as well, "Explain why none of the shadows in Mementos ever talk about Madarame, except that one dude."

"We should get going." Mona suggests. "The treasure should be close by, if I remember right, there should only be a few rooms past here."

"Thank god." Skull huffs, "I'm gettin' pretty tired."

Akira felt tired too. His head throbbed and his body felt sluggish as he lead the way back towards the security room. He's careful, though, not to let his sluggishness affect typing in the password.

The screen lights up immediately, flashing green before opening up a set of menus. Akira filters through them, turning off laser grids and unlocking doors, leaving the previously guarded corridor from before open for them to walk through. He compares it to the map of the second floor and, true to what Morgana had pointed out, there were only two more corridors of the palace that they hadn't seen and Madarame would be behind one of them.

Akira leads them back through where they'd been before, sneaking past the enter-able paintings and into the walkway across from it. The now opened area was quiet with lack of activity, yet the unknown still had Akira's heart racing.

"That room, Joker!" Mona whispers from his side. Kneeling as low as he is, the cat is almost as tall as he is. "For some reason, it's cognition is really low." As soon as he says this, the closed door and the wall around it fades from its golden color into dark brown wood and a fragile looking door.

"That looks like the entrance to sensei's room." Fox points out, no longer hiding along the wall. "Would the treasure be beyond that door?"

"Unlikely." Mona counters. The cat steps forward too, heading towards the door, "Madarame wouldn't be able to guard the treasure very well if it were in a room of low cognition."

Akira follows after his teammate and steps into the room as Fox opens the door. Like the door had moments ago, the room flashes into a replication of Madarame's shack, even the smell shifts slightly as Akira files into the room behind the others. It disappears just as quickly though, leaving a small golden room behind as the shack's interior disappears.
"How strange." Fox muses quietly. "This is the first time in recent memory of seeing the inside of Madarame's room. Odd that I'd only see past the door by entering his heart."

"That ain't weird." Skull corrects, "That's just sad, man."

"Yes, I suppose it is." The artist sighs.

"Can we-" Panther yawns, "See that map, Joker?" She requests, tapping on a table in the center of the room that flashes from gold to dark brown every few moments.

Akira pulls the two maps from his coat and spreads them over the table. His fingers flow through the rooms- and paintings- they've been through quickly, Panther's following after his shortly after until they both arrive at the same door at the end of the corridor they'd just entered, the only room they haven't been in yet.

Morgana was right, the treasure wouldn't be far off. Just through the door down the hall.

"So the treasure should be in this room, Mona?" Panther inquires, "It doesn't seem very big."

The cat shrugs, "I can feel the treasure is pretty close by, but... it seems further away than when we were just down the hall."

Panther frowns. It seems like she's doing a lot of that. "Do you think Madarame moved the treasure?"

"Can he do that?" Skull tacks on.

Mona taps on the map, towards the end of the hall, "I'm not sure. But this is the last place it could be. Madarame might be doing something to interfere with my abilities."

"He can do that?" Skull asks again.

The cat pouts, "I-I'm not sure. It's never happened before, but it could happen, I think."

The blond grunts and slides the map for the second floor closer towards him. "S'just one left, right? I guess there's only one way to find out."

Mona nods, then turns towards him, "Ready, Joker?" When Akira nods, his teammate asks the same of Panther, who nods as well. Akira turns towards Fox when his teammate does, and finds the artist whispering softly towards one of the room's paintings. The canvas shifts between a golden depiction of Madarame and a faded painting of two figures, the other teen is blocking most of the image, so he only sees some of the image; Akira doesn't recognize either of them and isn't sure if he should ask if Fox does.

"Fox?" Panther asks loudly when the artist doesn't respond to Mona.

Fox goes silent, then turns away from the painting. "Oh, are we going now?" He questions lightly.

"Uh... yeah." Panther drawls out slowly.

The artist nods and walks towards them silently. Akira's not sure what to make of the interaction, neither Panther or Skull had spent much time examining Kamoshida's palace. Alternatively, neither of them had viewed Kamoshida like Fox viewed Madarame. The artist wanted to help his father figure, just like he'd wanted to help Suzui and the others, yet, despite their similarities, something about the other boy made him uneasy.
He wondered if Fox felt the same way.

The door to Madarame's bedroom flashes under his hands when he pries it open, turning back to gold from brown wood; regardless of its form, it still creaks slightly as Akira pushes it open slowly. He peers into the hallway, looking for shadows or other signs of danger, but finds nothing. From his position, he can see straight down the hall, all the way to where the door the treasure should be behind.

Pulling the door fully open, Akira waves his teammates behind them and, even though there weren't any shadows, he leads them around the edge of the room until they reach the door. Like before, Akira pulls the door open slowly and peers through the crack made between the door and wall.

Nothing moves past the door, no sounds come from the other side either. Slowly, he pulls the door fully open and takes a step through, then another.

The hallway they'd just left opens up into another hallway, not dissimilar to the garden from before. Small, identical looking trees line either side of the hallway in small, golden pots; the pots themselves aren't identical to each other, each are printed with a different- also golden- kanji. He finds them difficult to read, but otherwise harmless.

Slowly, he leads the others down the next hallway, pausing whenever he hears an unusual sound or a shadow seems to slide across the floor. Eventually, the planted trees stop and the hallway opens up into a massive room. The hallways bends off on either side and wraps around the room as a balcony with a large fence that sweeps across all but one wall. The wall across from him is covered in enormous framed paintings, each one is at least twice as tall as he is, maybe even more, and suspended from metal scaffolding at awkward angles.

Akira walks closer to the guardrails and peers upwards, then towards the floor. The room goes straight to the ground level, maybe even lower, and straight up for some ways, until paintings become blurs of color, but mostly shadow.

Madarame isn't in the room like he'd been expecting, nor was the treasure.

"Uh... Where's Madarame?" Skull questions from his side. The blond leans over the railing, and Akira feels his stomach drop into his feet at the thought of falling from such a height. "I don't see the treasure, either..." Panther comments.

"Those paintings look quite strange, though," Fox points towards the far wall, where the massive paintings hang. "Could one of those be the treasure?"

"Nah, dude." Skull rebukes, still leaning over the balcony's edge, "It's kinda like, a ball thing. It... glows and stuff."

"Could it be inside one of the paintings then?" The artist questions next.

"It might be possible... Madarame is an artist after all." Mona nods. Panther nods as well, "Maybe that's why you can't sense it or whatever? 'Cause he hid in one of the paintings."

Mona walks ahead of him as they walk around the room and towards the paintings and jumps in first once they're close enough. Akira's not sure why he does this, but quickly follows after the other and is instantly assaulted by whipping wind and a sinking sensation. Looking down, he finds his feet starting to sink in bright orange sand. Even through his boots, he can feel its warmth starting to bleed into his skin.
Akira thinks back on Fox's words as his feet continue to sink into the painting. In his life, he'd seen sand a few times, mostly on his way home from school, but he'd never touched it before. He never thought it would be this warm or make him sink, and he'd never considered that he might learn those things while inside of Madarame's heart.

"Alas," Madarame's voice sighs out upon a gust of desert wind, "This world is a desert filled with laymen who cannot understand true beauty. The slow drain of my skill is inevitable when I am surrounded by such mediocrity."

The next painting he steps into leaves him just as shocked as the last one. The shift from hot to cold makes his skin squeeze in on itself. Even with most of his skin covered, moisture soaks into his skin as a current sweeps underneath his feet. A large torii gate stands tall in the middle of the storm, bright red against ever-shifting blue clouds and water.

Akira walks towards it, fighting against the painting's current, and hears Madarame's voice grow louder as he gets closer. "The gods!" The artist booms over the rush of water, sounding like light lightning despite the clear skies overhead, "Even in their dormancy, are worshiped constantly! People gather under shrine gates, offer their money, and return home satisfied! Art is practically the same! In the end, it's all a matter of imagination." Madarame's voice fades off with a laugh as Akira slides under the large gate and into the next frame.

The air remains wet, but Akira hears his- and his teammates- boots squeak loudly as he walks across a jungle floor, ducking under tree branches as he follows a narrow path. Madarame's thoughts call out once again, dulling the experience. "Hard work is not what makes a sapling grow thick with green leaves. Too many young people do not see the true value in youth these days. What fools. Is it truly wrong for an expert such as myself to capitalize on that youth before it wastes away?"

"Could a ship skirt across the ocean if its crew had to constantly worry about what sea life might lie below? Art, life, water! They are all identical! The one who ascends to the summit is the victor."

"Beauty is but a mirage." Madarame sighs out, smoke billows through the canvas in a thick wave, blocking another forest view from his vision. "Transforming that into money is what brings about true happiness. My mansion, my lifestyle among the chosen few. Those things are the true art!"

Akira steps into the next canvas, only to find himself falling out of the painting entirely. He falls, face first, onto the scaffolding that the paintings were suspended from and the entire structure rattles loudly when his body collides with it.

"Those were truly sensei's thoughts?" Fox asks quietly as he steps down from the frame. "How despicable... To think I'd been blinded by his act for so long. We've seen so many of his paintings, yet, not once, did he mention a love for art."

The taller teen turns back towards the painting he'd just exited from and rests his hands on it. Smoking ice spills out from his fingers and spreads across the landscapes depicted, freezing them where the ice spreads. "These are not paintings. They are meaningless self-assertions placed into frames!" He shouts, his usually tame voice echoes off the chamber's walls.

Akira pulls himself to his feet as Panther pulls Fox into an embrace, red arms sliding over shaking shoulders.

"We should move, before any shadows notice us." Mona suggests quietly, pointing towards a door that wasn't on the map.
Maybe the treasure is behind there? Akira hopes. If that were the case, Madarame would be waiting too.

The room opens up into another gallery, nearly identical to the ones on the first floor except they shouldn't exist. The map ends in the massive gallery from the room before, and the door they walked through shouldn't exist either. But it did, along with the shadow guards patrolling around it.

Akira sneaks around them, he was starting to feel tired as well, and he hoped that nothing as dangerous appeared in front of them before they found Madarame's treasure.

"Wait." Skull whispers loudly as Akira's about to pull another golden door open. Akira turns to look behind him and finds his teammate pointing towards a set of doorways. "Do the shadows y'know... go?"

"Don't be gross!" Panther chastises at the same time as Morgana does, "Of course not!"

"What are the chances of Madarame's treasure being in a bathroom, though?" The blond continues. Despite everything, the other boy is still smiling.

"I don't feel anything close by, so let's just keep looking." Mona insists. Skull turns towards him and shrugs.

Akira shrugs back, then turns towards the door he was about to push open.

The other side of the door blinds him with an unrivaled intensity. A step through the door and everything turns into bright shades of gold, even the sky despite the museum being cast in constant darkness; it leaves him wondering if they'd managed to step outside or if this was another display of Madarame's true nature.

"There's so much gold..." Panther groans. "It's actually hurting my eyes."

Mona steps forward once more and sniffs at the air, "The distortion is especially bad here. This place is barely holding together, plus it's not even on the map..."

The room seems to go on forever in each direction. Walkways and stairs float with support, some upside-down or sideways and with no way to access them. Akira steps forward though, hoping that he might catch glimpse of the treasure before anything else happens. Various artifacts of Madarame's museum hang in the air, suspended in the golden air by nothing but Madarame's consciousness; framed pictures of the artist's pupils float slowly through the air and Akira is pretty certain he sees Fox's face float by in the distance.

The walkway leads to a small pedestal, also golden, with an unusual charm on top and when he clutches his hands around it he feels his vision blur as an unfamiliar voice calls out.

"Sensei!" A boy's voice screams without a source. "I got you this!" The charm glows faintly in his hand, but does nothing else as he drops it into his pocket. He glances over his shoulder at his teammates, only to find them staring back quietly.

Had they not heard the strange voice?

After he grabs the keychain, the golden walkways unfolds, stretching outwards towards a large, platform. The platform, like the rest of the room, floats solidly in the empty space. Two sets of stairs, each going in a different direction, are guarded by matching easels. Each has a painting on top, one that Akira recognizes from earlier that week. Images of the Sayuri sit on the stands, staring away from him. Fox takes an immediate interest in them, sliding past him with an air of ice. Akira
watches as the artist starts running his hands over the figure's face, then another detail on the other.

"The Sayuri." He mumbles loud enough for Akira to hear. "Though this one is fraudulent."

Fox sighs and sets one of the paintings back on its stand, "I'm not sure how much of this I can take." He whispers still.

Panther steps around him and approaches their newest teammate. She pulls the artist into an embrace and when she talks, she uses a hushed voice, but it still seems to echo around the room. "Do you want to leave, Yusuke-kun? I know it can be rough seeing someone you love like this..."

*Like this?* He wondered if she meant about Suzui or if she'd seen other people hurt like Kitagawa was.

"Yeah, dude." Skull says, not bothering with controlling the volume of his voice. "We still have time before the art show-thingy ends, we can head back if it's too much for you or whatever."

Fox nods silently against Panther's head, then shakes his head with another sigh. "Sensei-Madarame is planning on revealing a brand new piece on the second to last day of the gallery. Would that not impact the dangers of this place?"

"Another piece?" Mona questions, also stepping around him. "It could be possible..."

"It'd be all over the news an' stuff." Skull points out.

The cat nods, "If that's the case, the palace might grow even bigger..." Panther nods as well, her face scratching where it's still pressed against the artist's chest. "Plus this place isn't even on the map, so who knows how much more of it there is..."

"Ooh!" Skull's voice echoes noisily around the empty space. When Akira turns back towards his teammate, he finds the blond smiling widely under his mask. "What if we sent the calling card as he released that new thing? It'd be all over the place! He'd be so freaked out."

"That's not a bad idea, Skull, assuming we find the treasure in time." Mona concedes. "The shock from being called out might make changing his heart easier."

"Plus," The blond drawls out cheerfully, "We'd be totally famous!"

"Famous?" Fox questions, "I- I'm not sure I can continue doing this if fame is the Phantom Thieves' true goal..."

"Ryuji." Panther snaps, finally releasing the artist to turn towards her other teammate, only to turn right back to the person in front of her. "It's not Kitagawa-kun. We're really just trying to help you, and Madarame, too."

"Very well." Fox amends, then points towards the stairs on the other end of the platform. "Shall we try the stairs then? Surely one of these two should bring us closer to the treasure?"

"Can you tell which way the treasure is, Mona?" Panther asks. The cat shakes his head slowly, "It's hard to tell. As soon as we stepped into this room it feels like I've completely lost my sense of direction... I er, I mean the treasure has to be close. We just need to look for any clues before we delve deeper into the unknown."

Skull takes a step onto the ascending staircase and looks back at them, "Up is always good, right?"
"Or it could be bad." Panther argues, taking a few steps down the lower path.

"It's possible they could both be bad, of course." Fox points out, but drops down to where Takamaki's level.

"What do you think, Joker? Up or down?" Mona asks from just below. Akira steps forward and looks between the two paths. Both are practically identical, golden stairs leading towards a veil of blue where a doorway should be; other than up or down, nothing was different about the different options.

While Akira looks for differences, Skull, Panther, and Fox walk upwards and downwards, respectively, and step into the walkways, disappearing instantly behind the doorways only to collide into each other at the doorway Skull was just about to walk into.

"Carmen!" Panther shrieks as soon as she bumps into Skull, just before the upper staircase erupts in a well of fire and smoke. The sound, like every other in the room, echoes endlessly and makes his heart hammer painfully against his chest as fear starts to set in. In the next instance, his teammates, except for Mona, fall onto each other as they reappear in the doorway of the lower staircase.

"They're connected?" Mona questions, appearing unfazed by the sudden noise and violence, pointing to where their teammates had just been to where they are now. "There must be something more to this room than meets the eye, then..."

"Fuck that hurts!" Skull cries out from the bottom of the stairs. When Akira looks down at his clustered teammates, he finds Skull looking worse than he'd been moments ago; a large hole had been burned in the blond's jacket, exposing red and pink skin that, as the other boy grows closer, releases small wisps of smoke.

"Ryuji!" Panther calls out as she races after him. "I'm so sorry!"

"Can it, Takamaki, I don't wanna-" The other teen drops down onto the stair's stoop, facing away from him, and places a hand against his now exposed flesh. Akira can see his entire body recoil as he feels the wound. "Fuck that fucking hurts!"

Akira's not sure what he should be thinking, or what he should do for that matter, when he sees his teammates injuring each other. Even if he doesn't know what the right thing to do, either before or after it happened, his stomach still bubbles with unease at the situation. If he'd told either of them to wait, the entire thing would have been prevented, but he hadn't. If he'd went with either of them, he could have stopped Takamaki from being scared, but, again, he hadn't.

Akira's not sure what to do, either, the two paths seem to lead into each other and the only thing his thief vision brought to interest was his injured teammate and the two paintings.

"Maybe there's more to these paintings that meets the eye." Fox says suddenly. Akira turns to find the artist suddenly beside him, handling one of the Sayuri paintings. "It would be a tight fit, but maybe we could-" The artist's hand, bright and blue, pierces through the Sayuri's blue gown and the entire world seems to vibrate for a moment before the other- not destroyed- painting catches his eye just as it disintegrates into itself.

A bright ball of light emerges from the painting, one that looks similar to how a treasure might, and flies off, towards the upper staircase his teammates had just fallen from. The doorway begins to glow a bright gold color that blends in with the golden space around it.

"Um." Fox hums, still staring at the canvas his hand had punctured through. "This was not my
intention." He explains quietly as he finally tugs the broken canvas off of his arm. It clatters on the ground once, then slides over the edge of the platform. Akira's not sure where it goes after that.

"Told you I was right!" Ryuji cheers, no longer sounding in pain. When Akira turns, once again, towards his teammate, he finds Skull smiling and appearing no longer injured, the smell of burning flesh had faded as well, though his costume is still tattered where Panther had burnt him, exposing a wide patch of Skull's unscarred chest.

"By destroying the fake paintings, we find the real path, then?" Mona confirms, the cat is looking towards Fox with a smile. "Nice work, Fox."

"I did something?" Fox questions, falling into step behind Mona as the cat follows after Panther.

"I mean, I would have figured it out sooner, if these two idiots weren't running off and hurting each other." The cat explains, flipping a paw towards the two at the top of the staircase.

Skull and Panther's faces both go red under their masks. Both of them remain silent though, and step into the now golden doorway together with Mona and Fox following shortly after them.

Akira steps through the doorway alone and feels his entire body shift as the doorway seems to shrink and expand endlessly in the few seconds it takes for him to make his way through. The golden doorway opens up another platform, nearly identical to the one they'd just been on, but a different shape. In the distance, he could see more and more easels lined up on the edges of the platform.

Tired, he continues forward, after his teammates, and stands next to them as Fox begins examining the number of canvases; like before, all of the paintings were like the Sayuri, but there was something slightly different about each one.

"There's more up there too." Panther points out, gesturing to another walkway that was connected to theirs.

Akira looked around, at the paintings and the platforms, but found nowhere for them to go, even if they did find the right painting.

"Not this one." Fox says after a long moment, his sword pierces through the painting and stand. When he retracts the blade, the entire thing topples over the edge of the platform. "To think these counterfeits would make up the alchemy of sensei's brain." The artist mumbles as he steps towards another painting.

"The hair is different on this one." Fox says instantly before executing the painting.

"We should probably just stay out of his way." Panther suggests quietly before sitting down on the edge of the platform, her feet hang over the confusing mess that the room was made of. Skull joins her, sitting at her side while Mona takes the other.

Akira sits next to them. His legs flood with relief, cool and relaxed, when he does and lets out a sigh. Even as he takes a break, though, he makes sure to keep an eye on Fox the entire time, watching anxiously for something to happen.

A long time seems to pass before Fox finally narrows the correct painting down. The artist's sword doesn't make contact with the easel, instead, the taller boy embraces the painting just before it destroys itself, turning into another ball of light that flies into the air and sinks into the unknown beneath them.
He peers over the edge to see where it goes, but can't follow it through the golden fog and sideways platforms.

"What the hell? Where the shit did that one go?" Skull groans from beside him.

"Maybe it was my door?" Panther suggests as she pulls herself to her feet.

"That's a possibility. There don't seem to be any doors like those ones here." Mona amends, already walking towards the door they'd walked through.

Akira follows after him, shuddering when the door's effect washes over him. When he gets to the other side, he peers over the staircases' edge, towards the other doorway, and finds it glowing.

"Looks like we were both right." Panther chortles before sliding over the side of the staircase. Akira follows after her, hoping that the end would be just beyond it.

The doorway opens to another platform, this one was smaller than the others and turned sharply around a corner. Akira slides along the wall and listens intently, praying only the treasure would be around the corner.

The corner opens up into another hallway, golden like the museum they seemed to have abandoned. Madarame's face is printed into the walls with his name along every tile.

"It's close!" Mona whispers very loudly, making him jump. "I can feel it now!" The cat crawls between his legs and points towards the door at the end of the hallway.

"Finally." Skull sighs.

The door at the end of the hallways sweeps open silently and opens to a small, square room. Each wall has a large walkway and in the one across from the door he'd just walked through, Akira can see the treasure glowing faintly. Another sigh sweeps through him when he spots it. The relief at finding the treasure dissipates, however, when he notices that the treasure is locked behind a grid of lasers. Additionally, Madarame standing right in front of glowing blob, staring out at them, though it seems that the artist doesn't notice them at all.

"He's guarding it?" Panther whispers, stepping closer to take cover at the hallway's corner. "Kamoshida didn't do that, did he?"

"Do the treasures always look like that?" Fox asks, leaning over Panther to peer towards Madarame.

"At first," Mona explains, "But once we send the calling card, it'll materialize into the actual treasure."

"Doesn't it look darker than the last one, though?" Skull asks from the other corner.

"It might be because... um..." Mona trails off.

"You have no idea, do you?" Skull says shortly before Panther talks starts talking over him. "We can go now, right? We know where the treasure is and how to get it."

"Should we go now?" Panther suggests. "We know where it is and how to get there, not to mention we're exhausted."

Mona clears his throat, "Well, we do know where the treasure is, but the route isn't necessarily
secure. See, over there? The treasure is heavily guarded, not to mention Madarame."

Akira peers around the corner. Madarame and the treasure are still there, almost in reach, but also a line of guards circling around the room that he hadn't noticed before.

Even if they managed to get past the lasers, there was no way they could escape with the treasure. They just weren't that fast.

"Maybe we should just head home..." Skull suggests quietly. "We'll be able to figure somethin' out tomorrow."

"How're you holding up, Fox?" Panther questions suddenly. "You must be pretty exhausted, huh?"

Fox rolls his shoulder, "I must admit, seeing Madarame like this has been quite taxing, but I don't mean to slow all of you down; I can keep going for a little longer."

"Joker?" Mona questions, turning back towards him. "Should we keep going?"

Put on the spot, he's not sure what to decide. He was tired- they all were- and if they managed to catch Madarame's attention, there wouldn't be much they could do to fight back. On the other hand, the palace would only grow larger and more guarded the longer they waited, more so if what Fox had revealed earlier.

"We should keep going." He suggest to Mona, who repeats it to the others.

Skull sighs, making him wonder if he was pushing the others too hard. "Let's get going then."

The five of them step away from the two corners and Akira leads them to the left, but finds it blocked behind another barrier. The other way leads into a control room, unlike the others, it has no guard. One wall is taken up by a large control panel, above it is a large window that gives them another view of Madarame and his treasure.

"There's only three options on this computer. And hey, look at that!" Skull says cheerfully. The computer screen makes his teeth shine brightly. "No password required!"


"Let's open up the gates, but maybe we should wait on turning off the lasers and the lights until the real thing, just in case Madarame gets like, a new password or something."

"Sounds like a good idea, Panther." Mona hums, "I'm still concerned how we're going to get the treasure and get out. Even with the lights off, the shadows might still try to attack us..."

"Can they see in the dark?" Fox questions. The artist stares out the control room's window and doesn't look back at Mona as he responds. "I'm not sure."

Panther shrugs, "It's pretty dark in Mementos, and the shadows there seem to see us fine for the most part."

Akira wasn't sure either way, but hoped that they wouldn't have to put themselves in too much danger to change Madarame's heart; just getting to this point had drained them all.

Together, they sneak past the entrance hall and through the corridor that had been closed off. Like with Kamoshida's palace, a balcony opens up over it, but not close enough that they could sneak
towards where the treasure is, not even considering the lasers and shadows guarding it.

The hallway spirals up into a room that looks nearly identical to the previous security rooms, only with no computers.

"What's this room used for?" Skull questions, "Kinda just looks like the one we just left."

"It looks like these machines control the mechanisms in the museum." Fox observes. The artist is leaning closely towards a tall machine that goes from floor to ceiling. "Given the number of hanging works, it makes sense to have a room dedicated to controlling them."

"He really thought out everything in his museum, huh?" Skull huffs, then murmurs, "It's kinda creepy, isn't it?"

"Well, he did have all those blueprints and documents about getting a museum, maybe his other half just remembered all of it and made this nightmare?" Panther offers. "It is really, really creepy though."

"Blueprints?" Fox questions, turning away from one of the machines to look back at her. Panther flinches, but nods. "Uh, yeah. In his room, he had a bunch of documents about getting his own museum."

"Oh." Fox exhales.

The questions die down after that. Akira continues to look around the room, wondering if the machines might somehow help them. He doubted it, but the window shaped hole near the ceiling drew his attention. It held an opaque mist to it, like the doorways from before. This one glowed blue and Akira had no idea where it might go, so he didn't reach into it to find out.

"This looks interesting." Fox says suddenly, dropping a gloved hand on a switch just below the glowing hole.

"The cord goes into the next room, maybe it'll lift the treasure up?" Panther says hopefully.

"Probably not." Fox rebuffs quietly.

"Let's follow the cord and find out. It might still be useful for our operation." Mona recommends, gesturing towards a small ladder that leads up to an even higher room.

"I'll stay here, just inform me when you want me to pull it." Fox offers.

Mona leaps up first, not even using the ladder before he lands softly on the platform above. Akira follows after him and steps onto a thin platform that only leads to thinner platforms that are suspended from the ceiling by thin wires. The cord leading from the crank curves around the ceiling and disappear from sight.

"I'll uh, just wait here." Skull says quietly as Mona jumps onto the first strung-up platform.

"You're not scared, are you?" Panther snickers quietly as she steps past him.

"N-no!" He huffs. "Just hurry up, will ya?"

Akira sucks in a deep breath before he makes the first jump. It reminds him of jumping from Madarame's wall and onto the torii gates, except this time he was sweating and exhausted. The one after that was much easier and Akira joins his teammate in peering over the platforms edge.
It's here! He thinks instinctively. The treasure was right below the platform they were standing on. The feeling of relief that had died before seemed to swell back up inside of him.

"Joker." Mona whispers, a barely there whisper that he wouldn't have noticed if the cat hadn't grabbed onto his pant leg. "There!"

Akira follows the extended paw upwards and a claw falls into view. Extending from it, and leading back to the room they just left, was the same cord from before.

"Go ahead and gesture to Skull, Panther." Mona orders.

Moments later, the hook starts to lower from the ceiling. It creaks noisily on its way down and Akira catches Madarame and his guards looking in each direction trying to find the source of the noise. Akira feels his heart threaten to give out as Madarame looks in every direction except up.

"Tell him to stop!" Mona hisses back at them.

The hook retracts silently until it's hanging above them once again.

"Let's get back to the others." Mona suggests, twisting around and jumping back to where Skull was waiting.

"So, we gotta way in or not?" The blond questions as soon as they're all back in the room below.

"The hook is right above the treasure, plus there's no lasers on top of the treasure!" Mona laughs.

"Seems like quite a large hole in their security..." Fox points out.

"You say that like it's bad for us." Panther huffs quietly. "Anyways, can we go home now?"

"We've secured a route to the treasure, now we just need to send the calling card and come back." Mona lists off.

Panther leads them back through the entrance hall and back until they're back on the map of the museum. He's not even sure he should keep the maps at this point, there seemed to be an entire museum that wasn't on the pages they had, but he still uses them to track their path towards the entrance until they can safely re-active that MetaNav.

The pressure from the MetaVerse drops off like a physical weight, even as his clothes are replaced with different ones, he feels lighter, but at the same time, how drained he is catches up to him almost instantly, like he's been suddenly thrown into the ocean.

There aren't any goodbyes between the five of them as they separate for the evening. Akira sighs as he collapses into one of the train's seats and stares out into the darkened sky, grateful for the day to be over.

Cafe LeBlanc is dark when he steps inside of it, but he doesn't turn on any lights as he locks the door behind him and crawls into the attic. He's soaked in sweat and feels dirty, but doesn't feel like bathing. Instead, he crawls into the bed in the corner and finally falls asleep, not bothering to take off his shoes or to remove Morgana from his shoulder.
Surprise, I'm not dead.
Please leave a review if you should feel so inclined.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!